Céline

Journey to the End of the Night

1

Here's how it started. I'd never said a word. Not one word. It was Arthur Ganate that made me speak up. Arthur was a friend from med school. So we meet on the Place Clichy. It was after breakfast. He wants to talk to me. I listen. "Not out here," he says. "Let's go in." We go in. And there we were. "This terrace," he says, "is for jerks. Come on over there." Then we see that there's not a soul in the street, because of the heat; no cars, nothing. Same when it's very cold, not a soul in the street; I remember now, it was him who had said one time: "The people in Paris always look busy, when all they actually do is roam around from morning to night; it's obvious, because when the weather isn't right for walking around, when it's too cold or too hot, you don't see them anymore; they're all indoors, drinking their cafés crèmes or their beers. And that's the truth. The century of speed! they call it. Where? Great changes! they say. For instance? Nothing has changed. They go on admiring themselves, that's all. And that's not new either. Words. Even the words haven't changed much. Two or three little ones, here and there …" Pleased at having proclaimed these useful truths, we sat looking at the ladies in the café.

After a while the conversation turned to President Poincaré, who was due to inaugurate a puppy show that same morning, and that led to *Le Temps* where I'd read about it. Arthur Banate starts kidding me about *Le Temps*. "What a paper!" he says. "When it comes to defending the French race, it hasn't its equal." And quick to show I'm well informed, I fire back: "The French race can do with some defending, seeing it doesn't exist."

"Oh yes, it does!" he says. "And a fine race it is! the finest in the world, and anybody who says different is a yellow dog!" And he starts slanging me. Naturally I stuck to my guns.

"It's not true! What you call a race is nothing but a collection of riffraff like me, blearyeyed, flea-bitten, chilled to the bone. They came from the four corners of the earth, driven by hunger, plague, tumors, and the cold, and stopped here. They couldn't go any further because of the ocean. That's France, that's the French people."

"Bardamu," he says very gravely and a bit sadly. "Our forefathers were as good as we are, don't speak ill of them! …"

"You're right, Arthur, there you're right! Hateful and spineless, raped and robbed, mangled and witless, they were as good as we are, you can say that again! We never change. Neither our socks nor our masters nor our opinions, or we're so slow about it that it's no use. We were born loyal, and that's what killed us! Soldiers free of charge, heroes for everyone else, talking monkeys, tortured words, we are the minions of King Misery. He's our lord and master! When we misbehave, he tightens his grip … his fingers are around our neck, that makes it hard to talk, got to be careful if we want to eat … For nothing at all he'll choke you … It's not a life …"

"There's love, Bardamu!"

"Arthur," I tell him, "love is the infinite placed within the reach of poodles. I have my dignity!"

"You do, do you? You're an anarchist, that's what you are!" A wise guy, as you see, with only the most advanced opinions.

"That's right, you windbag, I'm an anarchist. And to prove it, I've written a kind of prayer of social vengeance, it'll bowl you over. *The Golden Wings!* That's the title!" And I recite:

"A God who counts minutes and pennies, a desperate sensual God, who grunts like a pig. A pig with golden wings, who falls and falls, always belly side up, ready for caresses, that's him, our master. Come, kiss me."

"Your little piece doesn't hold water," he says. "I'm for the established order, and I'm not interested in politics. What's more, the day my country asks me to shed my blood, it'll find me ready, and no slacker." That's what he said.

It so happened that the war was creeping up on us without our knowing it, and something was wrong with my wits. That short but animated discussion had tired me out. Besides, I was upset because the waiter had sort of called me a piker on account of the tip. Well, in the end Arthur and I made up. Completely. We agreed about almost everything.

"It's true," I said, trying to be conciliatory. "All in all, you're right. But the fact is we're all sitting in a big galley, pulling at the oars with all our might. You can't tell me different! … Sitting on nails and pulling like mad. And what do we get for it? Nothing! Thrashings and misery, hard words and hard knocks. We're workers, they say. Work, they call it! That's the crummiest part of the whole business. We're down in the hold,

heaving and panting, stinking and sweating our balls off, and meanwhile! Up on deck in the fresh air, what do you see?! Our masters having a fine time with beautiful pink and perfumed women on their laps. They send for us, we're brought up on deck. They put on their top hats and give us a big spiel like as follows: "You no-good swine! We're at war! Those stinkers in Country No. 2! We're going to board them and cut their livers out! Let's go! Let's go! We've got everything we need on board! All together now! Let's hear you shout so the deck trembles:

'Long live Country No. 1!' So you'll be heard for miles around. The man that shouts the loudest will get a medal and a lollipop! Let's go! And if there's anybody that doesn't want to be killed on the sea, he can go and get killed on land, it's even quicker!"

"That's the way it is exactly," said Arthur, suddenly willing to listen to reason. But just then, who should come marching past the cafe where we're sitting but a regiment with the colonel up front on his horse, looking nice and friendly, a fine figure of a man!

Enthusiasm lifted me to my feet.

"I'll just go see if that's the way it is!" I sing out to Arthur, and off I go to enlist, on the double.

"Ferdinand!" he yells back. "Don't be an ass!" I suppose he was nettled by the effect my heroism was having on the people all around us.

It kind of hurt my feelings the way he was taking it, but that didn't stop me. I fell right in.

"Here I am," I says to myself, "and here I stay." I just had time to call out to Arthur: "All right, you jerk, we'll see"? before we turned the corner. And there I was with the regiment, marching behind the colonel and his band. That's exactly how it happened.

We marched a long time. There were streets and more streets, and they were all crowded with civilians and their wives, cheering us on, bombarding us with flowers from café terraces, railroad stations, crowded churches. You never saw so many patriots in all your life! And then there were fewer patriots … It started to rain, and then there were still fewer and fewer, and not a single cheer, not one.

Pretty soon there was nobody but us, we were all alone. Row after row. The music had stopped. "Come to think of it," I said to myself, when I saw what was what, "this is no fun anymore! I'd better try something else!" I was about to clear out. Too late! They'd quietly shut the gate behind us civilians. We were caught like rats.

2

When you're in, you're in. They put us on horseback, and after we'd been on horseback for two months, they put us back on our feet. Maybe because of the expense. Anyway, one morning the colonel was looking for his horse, his orderly had made off with it, nobody knew where to, probably some quiet spot that bullets couldn't get to as easily as the middle of the road. Because that was exactly where the colonel and I had finally stationed ourselves, with me holding his orderly book while he wrote out his orders. Down the road, way in the distance, as far as we could see, there were two black dots, plunk in the middle like us, but they were two Germans and they'd been busy shooting for the last fifteen or twenty minutes.

Maybe our colonel knew why they were shooting, maybe the Germans knew, but I, so help me, hadn't the vaguest idea. As far back as I could search my memory, I hadn't done a thing to the Germans, I'd always treated them friendly and polite. I knew the Germans pretty well, I'd even gone to school in their country when I was little, near Hanover. I'd spoken their language. A bunch of loudmouthed little halfwits, that's what they were, with pale, furtive eyes like wolves; we'd go out to the woods together after school to feel the girls up, or we'd fire popguns or pistols you could buy for four marks. And we drank sugary beer together. But from that to shooting at us right in the middle of the road, without so much as a word of introduction, was a long way, a very long way. If you asked me, they were going too far.

This war, in fact, made no sense at all. It couldn't go on.

Had something weird got into these people? Something I didn't feel at all? I suppose I hadn't noticed it …

Anyway, my feelings toward them hadn't changed. In spite of everything. I'd have liked to understand their brutality, but what I wanted still more, enormously, with all my heart, was to get out of there, because suddenly the whole business looked to me like a great big mistake.

"In a mess like this," I said to myself, "there's nothing to be done, all you can do is clear out …"

Over our heads, two millimeters, maybe one millimeter from our temples, those long tempting lines of steel, that bullets make when they're out to kill you, were whistling through the hot summer air.

I'd never felt so useless as I did amid all those bullets in the sunlight. A vast and universal mockery.

I was only twenty at the time. Deserted farms in the distance, empty wide-open churches, as if the peasants had gone out for the day to attend a fair at the other end of the county, leaving everything they owned with us for safekeeping, their countryside, their carts with the shafts pointing in the air, their fields, their barnyards, the road, the trees, even the cows, a chained dog, the works. Leaving us free to do as we pleased while they were gone. Nice of them, in a way. "Still," I said to myself, "if they hadn't gone somewhere else, if there were still somebody here, I'm sure we wouldn't be behaving so badly! So disgustingly! We wouldn't dare in front of them!" But there wasn't a soul to watch us! Nobody but us, like newlyweds that start messing around when all the people have gone home. And another thought I had (behind a tree) was that I wished Déroulède? the one I'd heard so much about?had been there to describe his reactions when a ball tore open his guts. Those Germans squatting on the road, shooting so obstinately, were rotten shots, but they seemed to have ammunition to burn, whole warehouses full, it looked to me. Nobody could say this war was over! I have to hand it to the colonel, his bravery was remarkable. He roamed around in the middle of the road, up and down and back and forth in the midst of the bullets as calmly as if he'd been waiting for a friend on a station platform, except just a tiny bit impatient.

One thing I'd better tell you right away, I'd never been able to stomach the country, I'd always found it dreary, those endless fields of mud, those houses where nobody's ever home, those roads that don't go anywhere. And if to all that you add a war, it's completely unbearable. A sudden wind had come up on both sides of the road, the clattering leaves of the poplars mingled with the sharp crackling sounds aimed at us from down the road. Those unknown soldiers missed us every time, but they spun a thousand deaths around us, so close they seemed to clothe us. I was afraid to move.

That colonel, I could see, was a monster. Now I knew it for sure, he was worse than a dog, he couldn't conceive of his own death. At the same time I realized that there must be plenty of brave men like him in our army, and just as many no doubt in the army facing us. How many, I wondered. One or two million, say several millions in all? The thought turned my fear to panic. With such people this infernal lunacy could go on for ever… . Why would they stop? Never had the world seemed so implacably doomed.

Could I, I thought, be the last coward on earth? How terrifying! … All alone with two million stark raving

heroic madmen, armed to the eyeballs? With and without helmets, without horses, on motorcycles, bellowing, in cars, screeching, shooting, plotting, flying, kneeling, digging, taking cover, bounding over trails, root-toot-tooting, shut up on earth as if it were a loony bin, ready to demolish everything on it, Germany, France, whole continents, everything that breathes, destroy destroy, madder than mad dogs, worshiping their madness (which dogs don't), a hundred, a thousand times madder than a thousand dogs, and a lot more vicious! A pretty mess we were in! No doubt about it, this crusade I'd let myself in for was the apocalypse!

You can be a virgin in horror the same as in sex. How, when I left the Place Clichy, could I have imagined such horror? Who could have suspected, before getting really into the war, all the ingredients that go to make up the rotten, heroic, good-for-nothing soul of man? And there I was, caught up in a mass flight into collective murder, into the fiery furnace … Something had come up from the depths, and this is what happened.

The colonel was still as cool as a cucumber, I watched him as he stood on the embankment, taking little messages sent by the general, reading them without haste as the bullets flew all around him, and tearing them into little pieces. Did none of those messages include an order to put an immediate stop to this abomination? Did no top brass tell him there had been a misunderstanding? A horrible mistake? A misdeal? That somebody'd got it all wrong, that the plan had been for maneuvers, a sham battle, not a massacre! Not at all! "Keep it up, colonel! You're doing fine!" That's what General des Entrayes, the head of our division and commander over us all, must have written in those notes that were being brought every five minutes by a courier, who looked greener and more shitless each time. I could have palled up with that boy, we'd have been scared together. But we had no time to fraternize. So there was no mistake? So there was no law against people shooting at people they couldn't even see! It was one of the things you could do without anybody reading you the riot act. In fact, it was recognized and probably encouraged by upstanding citizens, like the draft, or marriage, or hunting! … No two ways about it. I was suddenly on the most intimate terms with war. I'd lost my virginity. You've got to be pretty much alone with her as I was then to get a good look at her, the slut, full face and profile. A war had been switched on between us and the other side, and now it was burning! Like the current between the two carbons of an arc lamp! And this lamp was in no hurry to go out! It would get us all, the colonel and everyone else, he looked pretty spiffy now. but he wouldn't roast up any bigger than me when the current from the other side got him between the shoulders. There are different ways of being condemned to death. Oh! What wouldn't I have given to be in jail instead of here! What a fool I'd been! If only I had had a little foresight and stolen something or other when it would have been so easy and there was still time. I never think of anything. You come out of jail alive, out of a war you don't! The rest is blarney. If only I'd had time, but I didn't. There was nothing left to steal. How pleasant it would be in a cozy little jailhouse, I said to myself, where the bullets couldn't get in. Where they never got in! I knew of one that was ready and waiting, all sunny and warm! I saw it in my dreams, the jailhouse of Saint-Germain to be exact, right near the forest. I knew it well, I'd often passed that way. How a man changes! I was a child in those days, and that jail frightened me. Because I didn't know what men are like. Never again will I believe what they say or what they think. Men are the thing to be afraid of, always, men and nothing else.

How much longer would this madness have to go on before these monsters dropped with exhaustion? How long could a convulsion like this last? Months? Years? How many?

Maybe till everyone's dead? All these lunatics? Every last one of them? And seeing events were taking such a desperate turn, I decided to stake everything on one throw, to make one last try, to see if I couldn't stop the war, just me, all by myself! At least in this one spot where I happened to be.

The colonel was only two steps away from me, pacing. I'd talk to him. Something I'd never done. This was a time for daring. The way things stood, there was practically nothing to lose. "What is it?" he'd ask me, startled, I imagined, at my bold interruption. Then I'd explain the situation as I saw it, and we'd see what he thought. The essential is to talk things over. Two heads are better than one.

I was about to take that decisive step when, at that very moment, who should arrive on the double but a dismounted cavalryman (as we said in those days), exhausted, shaky in the joints, holding his helmet upside-down in one hand like Belisarius, trembling, all covered with mud, his face even greener than the courier I mentioned before. He stammered and gulped. You'd have thought he was struggling to climb out of a tomb, and it made him sick to his stomach. Could it be that this spook didn't like bullets any more than I did? That he saw them coming like me?

"What is it?" Disturbed, the colonel stopped him short; the glance he flung at that ghost was of steel.

It made our colonel very angry to see that wretched cavalryman so incorrectly clad and shitting in his pants with fright. The colonel had no use for fear, that was a sure thing. And especially that helmet held in hand like a bowler was really too much in a combat regiment like ours that was just getting into the war. It was as if this dismounted cavalryman had seen the war and taken his hat off in greeting.

Under the colonel's withering look the wobbly messenger snapped to attention, pressing his little finger to the seam of his trousers as the occasion demanded. And so he stood on the embankment, stiff as a board, swaying, the sweat running down his chin strap; his jaws were trembling so hard that little abortive cries kept coming out of him, like a puppy dreaming. You couldn't make out whether he wanted to speak to us or whether he was crying.

Our Germans squatting at the end of the road had just changed instruments. Now they were having their fun with a machine gun, sputtering like handfuls of matches, and all around us flew swarms of angry bullets, as hostile as wasps.

The man finally managed to articulate a few words:

"Colonel, sir, Sergeant Barousse has been killed."

"So what?"

"He was on his way to meet the bread wagon on the Etrapes road, sir."

"So what?"

"He was blown up by a shell!"

"So what, dammit!"

"That's what, colonel, sir."

"Is that all?"

"Yes, sir, that's all, colonel, sir."

"What about the bread?" the colonel asked.

That was the end of the dialogue, because, I remember distinctly, he barely had time to say

"What about the bread?" That was all. After that there was nothing but flame and noise. The kind of noise you wouldn't have thought possible. Our eyes, ears, nose, and mouth were so full of that noise I thought it was all over and I'd turned into noise and flame myself. After a while the flame went away, the noise stayed in my head, and my arms and legs trembled as if somebody were shaking me from behind. My limbs seemed to be leaving me, but then in the end they stayed on. The smoke stung my eyes for a long time, and the prickly smell of powder and sulfur hung on, strong enough to kill all the fleas and bedbugs in the whole world.

I thought of Sergeant Barousse, who had just gone up in smoke like the man told us. That was good news. Great, I thought to myself. That makes one less stinker in the regiment! He wanted to have me court-martialed for a can of meat. "It's an ill wind," I said to myself. In that respect, you can't deny it, the war seemed to serve a purpose now and then! I knew of three or four more in the regiment, real scum, that I'd have gladly helped to make the acquaintance of a shell, like Barousse.

As for the colonel, I didn't wish him any hard luck. But he was dead too. At first I didn't see him. The blast had carried him up the embankment and laid him down on his side, right in the arms of the dismounted cavalryman, the courier, who was finished too. They were embracing each other for the moment and for all eternity, but the cavalryman's head was gone, all he had was an opening at the top of the neck, with blood in it bubbling and glugging like jam in a kettle. The colonel's belly was wide open, and he was making a nasty face about it. It must have hurt when it happened. Tough shit for him! If he'd beat it when the shooting started, it wouldn't have happened.

All that tangled meat was bleeding profusely.

Shells were still bursting to the right and left of the scene.

I'd had enough, I was glad to have such a good pretext for making myself scarce. I even hummed a tune, and reeled like when you've been rowing a long way and your legs are wobbly. "Just one shell!" I said to myself. "Amazing how quick just one shell can clean things up. Could you believe it?" I kept saying to myself. "Could you believe it!" There was nobody left at the end of the road. The Germans were gone. But that little episode had taught me a quick lesson, to keep to the cover of the trees. I was in a hurry to get back to our command post, to see if anyone else in our regiment had been killed on reconnaissance. There must be some good dodges, I said to myself, for getting taken prisoner … Here and there in the fields a few puffs of smoke still

clung to the ground.

“Maybe they’re all dead,” I thought. “Seeing they refuse to understand anything whatsoever, the best solution would be for them all to get killed instantly … The war would be over, and we’d go home … Maybe we’d march across the Place Clichy in triumph … Just one or two survivors … In my dream … Strapping good fellows marching behind the general, all the rest would be dead like the colonel … Like Barousse … like Vanaille (another bastard) … *etc.* They’d shower us with decorations and flowers, we’d march through the Arc de Triomphe, We’d go to a restaurant, they’d serve us free of charge, we’d never pay for anything anymore, never as long as we lived! We’re heroes! we’d say when they brought the bill … Defenders of the Patrie! That would do it! … We’d pay with little French flags! … The lady at the cash desk would refuse to take money from heroes, she’d even give us some, with kisses thrown in, as we filed out. Life would be worth living.”

As I was running, I noticed my arm was bleeding, just a little though, a far from satisfactory wound, a scratch. I’d have to start all over.

It was raining again, the fields of Flanders oozed with dirty water. For a long time I didn’t meet a soul, only the wind and a little later the sun. From time to time, I couldn’t tell from where, a bullet would come flying merrily through the air and sunshine, looking for me, intent on killing me, there in the wilderness. Why? Never again, not if I lived another hundred years, would I go walking in the country. A solemn oath.

Walking along, I remembered the ceremony of the day before. It had taken place in a meadow, at the foot of a hill; the colonel had harangued the regiment in his booming voice:

“Go to it, boys,” he had cried. “Go to it, boys,” and “Vive la France!” When you have no imagination, dying is small beer; when you do have an imagination, dying is too much. That’s my opinion. My understanding has never taken in so many things at once. The colonel had never had any imagination. That was the source of all his trouble, and of ours even more so. Was I the only man in that regiment with any imagination about death? I preferred my own kind of death, the kind that comes late … in twenty years … thirty … maybe more … to this death they were trying to deal me right away … eating Flanders mud, my whole mouth full of it, fuller than full, split to the ears by a shell fragment. A man’s entitled to an opinion about his own death. But which way, if that was the case, should I go? Straight ahead? My back to the enemy. If the M.P.s were to catch me roaming around I knew my goose was cooked. They’d give me a slapdash trial that same afternoon in some deserted classroom … There were lots of empty classrooms wherever we went. They’d play court-martial with me the way kids play when the teacher isn’t there. The noncoms seated on the platform, me standing in handcuffs in front of the little desks. In the morning they’d shoot me: twelve bullets plus one. So what was the answer?

And I thought of the colonel again, such a brave man with his breastplate and his helmet and his mustache, if they had exhibited him in a music hall, walking as I saw him under the bullets and shellfire, he’d have filled the Alhambra, he’d have outshone Fragson, and he was a big star at the time I’m telling you about. That’s what I was thinking. My heart was down in the dumps.

After hours and hours of cautious, furtive walking, I finally caught sight of our men near a clump of farmhouses. That was one of our advance posts. It belonged to a squadron that was billeted nearby. Nobody killed, they told me. Every last one of them alive! I was the one with the big news: “The colonel’s dead,” I shouted, as soon as I was near enough.

“Plenty more colonels where he came from.” That was the snappy comeback of Corporal Pistil, who was on duty just then, what’s more, he was organizing details.

“All right, you jerk, until they find a replacement for the colonel, you can be picking up meat with Empouille and Kerdoncuff here, take two sacks each. The distribution point is behind the church … the one you see over there … Don’t let them give you a lot of bones like yesterday, and try and get back before nightfall, you lugs!” So I hit the road again with the other two.

That pissed me off. “I’ll never tell them anything after this,” I said to myself. I could see it was no use talking to those slobs, a tragedy like what I’d just seen was wasted on such stinkers! It had happened too long ago to capture their interest. And to think that a week earlier they’d have given me four columns and my picture in the papers for the death of a colonel the way I’d seen it. A bunch of halfwits.

The meat for the whole regiment was being distributed in a summery field, shaded by cherry trees and parched by the August sun. On sacks and tent cloths spread out on the grass there were pounds and pounds of guts, chunks of white and yellow fat, disemboweled sheep with their organs every which way, oozing intricate little rivulets into the grass round about, a whole ox, split down the middle, hanging on a tree, and four

regimental butchers all hacking away at it, cursing and swearing and pulling off choice morsels. The squadrons were fighting tooth and nail over the innards, especially the kidneys, and all around them swarms of flies such as one sees only on such occasions, as self-important and musical as little birds.

Blood and more blood, everywhere, all over the grass, in sluggish confluent puddles, looking for a congenial slope. A few steps further on, the last pig was being killed. Already four men and a butcher were fighting over certain of the prospective cuts.

“You crook, you! You’re the one that made off with the tenderloin yesterday!” Leaning against a tree, I had barely time enough to honor that alimentary dispute with two or three glances, before being overcome by an enormous urge to vomit, which I did so hard that I passed out.

They carried me back to the outfit on a stretcher. Naturally they swiped my two oilcloth sacks, the change was too good to miss.

I woke up to one of the corporal’s harangues. The war wasn’t over.

Anything can happen, and I in my turn became a corporal at the end of that same month of August. Many a time I was sent to headquarters with five men for liaison duty under General des Entrayes. He was a little man, he didn’t say much, and at first sight he seemed neither cruel nor heroic. But it was safer to suspend judgment … What he seemed to value most of all was his comfort. In fact he thought of his comfort all the time, and even when we’d been busy retreating for more than a month, he’d chew everybody out in every new stopping place if his orderly hadn’t found him a nice clean bed and a kitchen with all the modern appliances.

This love of comfort gave our chief of staff a lot of trouble. The general’s domestic requirements got on his nerves. Especially since he himself, yellow, gastritic in the extreme, and constipated, wasn’t the least bit interested in food. But he had to eat his soft-boiled eggs at the general’s table all the same, and listen on that occasion to his complaints. Those are the things a soldier has to put up with. But I couldn’t feel sorry for him, because as an officer he was a first-rate swine. Judge for yourself. After a whole day spent dragging ourselves uphill and down glade, through carrots and clover, we’d finally stop so the general could get to sleep somewhere, We’d find him a quiet, sheltered village, where no troops had been billeted yet, or if they had been, they’d have to move on in a hurry, we’d throw them out even if they’d already stacked their rifles, and they’d just have to spend the night in the open.

The village was reserved for the general staff, its horses, its mess, its luggage, and not least for that stinking major. The bastard’s name was Pinçon, Major Pinçon. I hope they’ve killed him off by now (and not pleasantly). But at the time I’m talking about Pinçon was disgustingly alive. Every evening he’d send for us liaison men and give us a good chewing out, to keep us on our toes and fire us with enthusiasm. Then he’d send us all over the place, after we’d run errands for the general all day. Dismount! Mount! Dismount again!

And more of the same, carrying his orders in all directions. They might just as well have drowned us. It would have been more convenient for everybody.

“Dismissed!” he’d yell. “Get back to your regiments! And on the double!”

“Where is the regiment, sir?” we’d ask …

“At Barbigny.”

“Where’s Barbigny?”

“Over there!”

Over there, where he pointed, there’d be nothing but darkness, same as everywhere else, an enormous darkness that swallowed up the road two steps ahead of us, only a little sliver of road about the size of your tongue was spared by the darkness.

This Barbigny of his was at the end of the world. Try and find it! To find his Barbigny you’d have had to sacrifice at least a whole squadron! A squadron of brave men, what’s more! And I wasn’t brave at all, I couldn’t see any reason to be brave, so obviously I had less desire than anyone else to find his Barbigny, the situation of which, incidentally, was pure guesswork as far as he was concerned. Maybe they thought they could make me go and commit suicide if they yelled loud enough. But either you have it in you or you don’t. I knew only one thing about that blackness, which was so dense you had the impression that if you stretched out your arm a little way from your shoulder you’d never see it again, but of that one thing I was absolutely certain, namely, that it was full of homicidal impulses. As soon as night fell, that big-mouth major couldn’t

wait to send us to our deaths; it was something that came over him at sundown. We'd try a bit of passive resistance, we'd pretend not to understand, we'd try to take root in that cozy little billet, but when we finally couldn't see the trees, we had to resign ourselves to going away and dying a little; the general's dinner was ready.

From then on, it was all a matter of luck. Sometimes we'd find Barbigny and the regiment and sometimes we wouldn't. When we found it, it was mostly by mistake, because the squadron sentries would start shooting at us. So naturally we'd advance and be recognized, and usually spend the night doing all sorts of details, carrying numberless bales of oats and buckets of water, and getting chewed out till our heads reeled, in addition to dropping with sleep.

In the morning, our liaison team, all five of us, would report back to General des Entrayes and get on with the war.

But most of the time we didn't find the regiment and we'd circle around villages on unknown trails, keeping away from evacuated hamlets and treacherous thickets?as much as possible we avoided those kinds of things because of German patrols. We had to be somewhere though while waiting, somewhere in the darkness. Some things couldn't be avoided. Ever since then I've known how wild rabbits must feel.

Pity comes in funny ways. If we'd told Major Pinçon that he was nothing but a cowardly stinking murderer, we'd only have given him pleasure, the pleasure of having us shot without delay by the M.P. captain, who was always following him around and who lived for nothing else. It wasn't the Germans thai M.P. had it in for.

So for night after idiotic night we crept from ambush to ambush, sustained only by the decreasingly plausible hope of coming out alive, that and no other, and if we did come out alive one thing was sure, that we'd never, absolutely never, forget that we had discovered on earth a man shaped like you and me, but a thousand times more ferocious than the crocodiles and sharks with wide-open jaws that circle just below the surface around the shiploads of garbage and rotten meat that get chucked overboard in the Havana roadstead. The biggest defeat in every department of life is to forget, especially the things that have done you in, and to die without realizing how far people can go in the way of crumminess. When the grave lies open before us, let's not try to be witty, but on the other hand, let's not forget, but make it our business to record the worst of the human viciousness we've seen without changing one word. When that's done, we can curl up our toes and sink into the pit. That's work enough for a lifetime.

I'd gladly have fed Major Pinçon to the sharks and his M.P. with him, to teach them how to live; my horse too while I was at it, so he wouldn't have to suffer anymore; the poor fellow didn't have any back left it was so sore, only two plaques of raw flesh under the saddle, as big as my two hands, oozing rivers of pus that ran from the edges of his blanket down to his hocks. I had to ride him all the same, trot trot … That trot trot made him wriggle and writhe. But horses are even more patient than people. His trot was an undulation. I had to leave him out in the open. In a barn the smell of his open wounds would have been asphyxiating. When I mounted him, his back hurt him so badly that he arched it, oh, very politely, and his belly hung down to his knees. It felt like mounting a donkey. It was easier that way, I have to admit. We were plenty tired ourselves with all the steel we had to carry on our heads and shoulders.

General des Entrayes was waiting for his dinner in his specially requisitioned house. The table had been set, the lamp was in its place.

"Beat it, Christ Almighty, the whole lot of you!" Pinçon yelled at us one more time, shaking his lantern under our noses. "We're sitting down to table! I'm telling you for the last time! Are those swine ever going to go!" he screamed. The passion of sending us to our death put a little color into his diaphanous cheeks.

Sometimes the general's cook would slip us a bite before we left. The general had too much to eat, seeing the regulations allowed him forty rations all for himself! He wasn't a young man anymore. In fact he must have been close to retirement age. His knees buckled when he walked and I'm pretty sure he dyed his mustache.

The veins in his temples, we could see in the lamplight as we were leaving, described meanders like the Seine on its way out of Paris. He had grown-up daughters, so it was said, unmarried and like himself not rich. Maybe those were the thoughts that made him so crotchety cranky, like an old dog disturbed in his habits, who goes looking for his quilted basket whenever anyone opens the door for him.

He loved beautiful gardens and rosebushes. Wherever we went, he never passed up a rose garden. When it comes to loving roses, generals haven't their equal. It's a known fact. Anyway we finally set out. It was hard to get the plugs started. They were afraid to move because of their wounds, but in addition they were afraid of us and the darkness, afraid of everything, to tell the truth. So were we! A dozen times we went back to ask the

major for directions! A dozen times he cursed us for goldbricks and goof-offs. Finally, with the help of our spurs, we'd pass the last outpost, give the sentries the password, and plunge into our murky adventure, into the darkness of this no man's land.

After wandering a while from side to side of the darkness, we finally got part of our bearings, or so at least we thought … Whenever one cloud seemed lighter than another, we were convinced that we'd seen something … But up ahead of us there was nothing we could be sure of but the echo that came and went, the echo of our horses' hoof beats, a horrendous sound you wanted so bad not to hear that it stopped your breath. Those horses seemed to be trotting to high heaven, to be calling everybody on earth to come and massacre us. And they could have done it with one hand, just steady a rifle against a tree and wait for us. I kept thinking that the first light we'd see would be the flash of the shot that would end it all.

In the four weeks the war had been going on, we'd grown so tired, so miserable, that tiredness had taken away some of my fear. In the end the torture of being harassed night and day by those monsters, the noncoms, especially the low-ranking ones, who were even stupider, pettier, and more hateful than usual, made even the most obstinate among us doubt the advisability of going on living.

Oh, how you long to get away! To sleep! That's the main thing! When it becomes really impossible to get away and sleep, then the will to live evaporates of its own accord. Seeing we were still alive, we'd just have to look as if we were looking for our regiment. Before a thought can start up in the brain of a jughead, a lot of cruel things must happen to him. The man who had made me think for the first time in my life, really think, practical thoughts that were really my own, was undoubtedly Major Pinçon, that torture master. I therefore thought of him as hard as I could as I clanked along, crushed by the weight of my armor, an extra in this incredible international extravaganza, into which, I have to admit, I had leapt with enthusiasm.

Every yard of darkness ahead of us was a promise of death and destruction. But how would it come? The only element of uncertainty was the uniform of the killer. Would he be one of us? Or of them?

I hadn't done anything to Pinçon! No more than I had to the Germans … With his face like a rotten peach, his four bands that glittered all over him from his head to his belly button, his scraggly mustache and his bony knees, with the field glasses dangling from his neck like a cowbell and his 1/1000 map. I kept wondering why he was so intent on sending other people to their death. Other people who had no maps,

We four horsemen on the road were making as much noise as a battalion. They must have heard us coming ten miles away, or else they didn't want to hear us. That was always a possibility. Maybe the Germans were afraid of us? Why not?

A month of sleepiness on every eyelid, that's what we were carrying, and as much again in the backs of our heads, plus all those pounds of tin.

The men in my party didn't express themselves very well. Actually they hardly spoke at all. They'd come from the ends of Brittany, and what they knew they hadn't learned at school but in the army. That night I tried to make a little conversation about the village of Barbigny with the one next to me … his name was Kersuzon.

"Kersuzon," I say. "We're in the Ardennes now … Do you see anything in the distance? I don't see a damn thing …"

"It's as black as an asshole," Kersuzon says. That was enough …

"But," I suggest, "haven't you heard anyone mention Barbigny in the course of the day?

Give you an idea where it is?"

"No."

That was that.

We never did find Barbigny. We went around in circles until morning and ended up in another village, where the man with the field glasses was waiting for us. The general was taking his black coffee in the arbor outside the mayor's house when we got there.

"Ah, Pinçon!" he says in a loud voice to his chief of staff as he sees us pass, "Youth is so wonderful!" After that he went out for a leak and then, stooped over, his hands behind his back, he took a little stroll. The general was very tired that morning, the orderly confided to me, he'd slept badly, some trouble with his bladder, so it seemed.

Kersuzon always gave me the same answer when I questioned him at night, as if I'd pressed a button, it kind of tickled me. Two or three times more he said the same thing about the asshole darkness and a while after that he was killed, on his way out of some village we'd mistaken for some other village by some French soldiers who'd mistaken us for somebody else.

It was a few days, I remember now, after Kersuzon was killed that we dreamed up a little trick that suited us fine to keep from getting lost in the darkness. So they were throwing us out of the billet. All right all right. We don't say a word. No griping, no comeback. "Clear out!" old wax face yelled as usual.

"Yes sir, very good sir."

And off we'd go in the direction of the gunfire, we didn't wait to be asked twice, all five of us. You'd have thought we were going to pick cherries. It was rolling country around there, the Meuse with its vine-covered hills, grapes that weren't ripe yet, and autumn, wooden villages well dried by three months of summer, highly inflammable.

We'd noticed that one night when we couldn't figure out where to go. There was always a village burning in the direction of the gunfire. We didn't go too close, we gave that village a wide berth and just watched, like an audience, so to speak, from maybe seven or eight miles away. And every night from then on all kinds of villages would burst into a blaze on the horizon, one after another, we'd be surrounded by them, dozens of burning villages in a circle, up ahead and on both sides, like a crazy carnival, sending up flames that licked the clouds.

We'd watch the flames as they swallowed up everything, churches and barns, one after another. The haystacks burned higher and livelier than anything else, the beams reared up in the darkness, throwing off sparks, before crashing into a sea of light. Even from ten or fifteen miles away you get a good view of a burning village, It was a merry sight. A tiny hamlet that you wouldn't even notice in the daytime, with ugly, uninteresting country around it, you can't imagine how impressive it can be when it's on fire at night! You'd think it was Notre-Dame! A village, even a small one, takes at least all night to burn, in the end it looks like an enormous flower, then there's only a bud, and after that nothing.

Smoke rises, and then it's morning.

We'd leave the horses saddled in a field close by, and they wouldn't move. We'd go and saw wood in the grass, all but one, naturally, who'd take his turn on guard. But when you've got fires to watch, the night passes a lot more pleasantly, it's not a hardship anymore, you're not alone.

Unfortunately, the villages didn't last … After a month's time there wasn't a village left in that neck of the woods. The forests were shelled too. They didn't last a week. Forests make nice enough fires, but they don't last.

After that the roads were all clogged with artillery columns going in one direction and civilians running away in the other.

So naturally we couldn't go either way, we could only stay where we were. We'd line up for the privilege of getting killed. Even the general couldn't find any billets with no soldiers in them. In the end we were sleeping in the fields, general or no general. Those who still had a bit of spirit lost it. That was when they started shooting men to bolster their morale, whole squadrons, and when our M.P. got a citation for the way in which he was carrying on his little private war, the real honest-to-goodness war.

3

They gave us a short rest, and a few weeks later we climbed back up on our horses and started north. The cold came with us. The gunfire was never far away. But we never came across any Germans except by accident, a hussar or a squad of riflemen here and there, in yellow and green, pretty colors. We seemed to be looking for them, but we beat it the moment we laid eyes on them. At every encounter two or three horsemen bit the dust, sometimes theirs, sometimes ours. And from far in the distance their riderless horses, with loose clanking stirrups, would come galloping toward us, we'd see their saddles with the peculiar cantles and all their leather as fresh and shiny as pocketbooks on New Year's Day. They were coming to see our horses, they made friends in no time. They were lucky. We couldn't have done that.

One morning when they rode in from a reconnaissance patrol, Lieutenant de SainteEngence swore to the other officers that he hadn't made it up. "I carved 'em I tell you. Two of them!" he insisted, showing everybody his saber, and true enough, the little groove was full of caked blood, that's what it's made for.

Captain Ortolan backed him up. "He was splendid! Bravo, SainteEngence! … Ah, messieurs, if you'd only seen him! What a charge!"

Ortolan was in command of the squadron.

"I saw every bit of it! I wasn't far away! A thrust to the right … Zing! The first one drops! … A thrust full in the chest! … Left! Cross! Championship style! … Bravo again, SainteEngence! Two lancers! Less than a mile from here! Still lying there! In a plowed field! The war's over for them, eh, SainteEngence? … A double thrust! Beautiful! I bet they spilled their guts like rabbits!"

Lieutenant de SainteEngence, whose horse had galloped a long way, received his comrades' compliments with modesty. Now that Ortolan had authenticated his exploit, his mind was at rest, so he rode off some distance and cooled off his mare by circling slowly around the assembled squadron as if he were just coming in from a steeplechase.

"We must send another patrol over there!" cried Captain Ortolan. "Immediately!" He was terribly excited. "Those two poor devils must have been lost to come this way, but there must be more behind them … Ah, Corporal Bardamu. Go take a look, you and your four men!"

The captain was talking to me.

"And when they fire at you, try to make a note of their position and come right back and tell me where they are! They must be Brandenburgers! …"

The regular army men told me that in peacetime this Captain Ortolan hardly ever showed up for duty. Now that a war was on, he made up for it. He was indefatigable. His vigor and verve, even among all those other lunatics, were getting more unbelievable from day to day. It was rumored that he sniffed cocaine. Pale, rings under his eyes, always dashing around on his fragile legs … Whenever he set foot on the ground, he'd stagger at first but then he'd get hold of himself and stride angrily over the furrowed fields in search of some new feat of daring. I wouldn't have been surprised if he'd sent us to get a light from the muzzles of the enemy's guns. He was in cahoots with death. I'd have sworn they had a contract, death and Captain Ortolan.

He'd spent the first part of his life (I had made it my business to find out) breaking his ribs in horse shows several times a year. And his legs, because of also being broken and not being used for walking, had lost their calves. When he walked, it was with nervous, pigeon-toed steps, as though walking on eggs. Seeing him in his enormous greatcoat, stooped over in the rain, you'd have taken him for the phantom hindquarters of a race horse. It needs to be said, though, that at the start of that monstrous enterprise, during the month of August and through September, certain hours, whole days now and then, certain stretches of road and parts of forest were still propitious to the doomed … In those places you could toy with the illusion that you were more or less safe, you could finish eating your bread and bully beef without being too much plagued by the foreboding that this was the last time. But from October on there were no more of these little lulls, the hail fell thicker and sharper and faster, spiced with shot and shell. Soon we'd be at the heart of the storm, and the very thing we were trying not to see, our death, would be so close to our noses that we couldn't see anything else.

The night, which had terrified us at first, seemed almost pleasant by comparison. In the end we longed for the night and waited for it. It was harder for them to shoot at us then than in the daytime. That was the only difference that counted.

It's hard to face the facts, even in connection with war the imagination holds its own for a long time.

Cats who've been threatened by fire for too long end up by jumping in the water. During the night we'd cadge a few minutes here and there that came pretty close to the blessed days of peace, those days that now seem too good to be true, when everything was benign, when nothing really mattered, when we did so many things that had come to seem so marvelously, superlatively delightful. Days of peace, days of living velvet … But soon the nights as well were a merciless torment. Almost every night we'd have to keep our weary bones at work, put up with a little extra torture, just so as to eat or catch a little nap in the darkness. The food convoys moved up to the front lines at a disgraceful crawl, long limping lines of shaky wagons, bursting with meat, prisoners, wounded, oats, rice, and M.P.'s, and don't forget the wine in big jiggling pot-bellied jugs that reminded us of high old times.

Behind the rolling forge and the bread wagon men came dragging themselves on foot, prisoners in handcuffs, some of theirs and some of ours, condemned to this or that, lashed by the wrists to the M.P.s' stirrups, some due to be shot the next day and no downer in the mouth than the others. It didn't spoil their appetites either, they ate their ration of that tuna fish that's so indigestible (they wouldn't have time to digest it) while waiting by the side of the road for the convoy to shove off?and they ate their last chunk of bread, too, with a civilian chained to them, who was said to be a spy but he didn't know it. Neither did we. The military torture continued in its nocturnal aspect … Groping our way through the hump-backed streets of a village without light or face, bent under sacks that weighed more than a man, from one unknown barn to another, threatened and yelled at, haggard, with no better prospect than to end in a sea of liquid manure, sickened at the thought that we'd been tortured, duped to the entrails by a gang of vicious lunatics, who had suddenly become incapable of doing anything else than killing and spilling their guts without knowing why. We'd flop down between two manure piles, but the noncoms would soon kick and bellow us to our feet, and send us to a different part of the convoy, to load or unload something else.

The village darkness was gorged with food and soldiers, bloated with fat, apples, oats, sugar, that we had to haul around and distribute to this squad and that squad. That convoy had brought everything except a ticket home.

Our detail was dead tired, we'd drop right next to our cart, and the sergeant-major would come around and shine his lantern on the corpses. He was an ape with a double chin. Regardless of the chaos, he had to find a watering place for the horses! Oh yes, the horses had to drink! But I've seen four men, ass and all, drop with fatigue, and fall fast asleep with the water up to their necks.

After the watering we had to find the alley we'd come by and get back to the farm, where we thought we'd left the rest of our squad. If we didn't find it, we could always pass out at the foot of some wall and sleep for an hour, if there was an hour left. In this business of getting killed, it's no use being picky and choosy … You've got to act as if life were going on, and that lie is the hardest part of it.

The wagons started back to the rear. In flight from the dawn, they hit the road again. Squeaking in every crooked wheel, off they drove, and with them went my prayer that they'd be ambushed, cut to pieces, burned that same day, the way you see in war pictures, supply column wiped out for ever and ever, with its escort of M.P. gorillas, horse soldiers, and lantern-swinging noncoms, with its work details, its sacks of lentils and flour that would never be cooked and never be seen, again. Because there are many different ways of kicking in, of exhaustion or something else, but the worst is to do it while hauling enough sacks to fill the night with.

The day when those motherfucking wagons would be shattered to the axles, they'd leave us alone, I thought, and even if only for one night, we'd be able to sleep with body and soul. This food supply business was just one more nightmare, a nasty little monster on top of the big one, the war. Brutes to the right of us, brutes to the left of us, they were all over the place. Condemned to a deferred death, the only thing that really mattered was an enormous longing for sleep, all the rest was torture, even the time and effort it took to eat. A bend in the brook, a familiar-looking wall … But mostly it was the smells helped us find our farm, we'd reverted to dogs in the wartime night of the deserted villages. The smell of shit was the best guide of all.

The quartermaster top kick was the guardian of the regiment's hatreds, he, until further notice, was master of the world. Anybody who talks about the future is a bastard, it's the present that counts. Invoking posterity is like making speeches to worms. There in the wartime village night the top kick was corraling human cattle for the big slaughterhouses that had just opened. The top sergeant was king. King of Death! Sergeant Cretelle!

Absolutely! Nobody more powerful! And nobody as powerful, except one of their top sergeants on the opposite side.

Nothing was left of the village, no living thing except terrified cats. First the furniture went, smashed up for

firewood, chairs, tables, sideboards, from the lightest to the heaviest. And anything that the boys could carry, they made off with. Combs, lamps, cups, silly little things, even bridal wreaths, everything went. As if we'd had years of life ahead of us. They looted to take their minds off their troubles, to make it look as if they had years before them. Everybody likes that feeling.

As far as they were concerned, gunfire was nothing but noise. That's why wars can keep going. Even the people who make them, who fight in them, don't really get the picture. Even with a bullet in their gut, they'd go on picking up old shoes that "might come in handy." The way a sheep, lying on its side in a meadow, will keep on grazing with its dying breath. Most people don't die until the last moment; others start twenty years in advance, sometimes more. Those are the unfortunates.

I wasn't very bright myself, but at least I had sense enough to opt for cowardice once and for all. I imagine that's why people thought I was so uncommonly calm. Be that as it may, I inspired a paradoxical confidence in our Captain Ortolan, who decided that night to entrust me with a delicate mission. It consisted, he told me in confidence, of trotting before daylight to Noirceursur-la-Lys, a city of weavers, situated some ten miles from the village where we'd camped. My job was to find out at firsthand whether the enemy was there or not. All that day patrols had been contradicting one another, and General des Entrayes was good and sick of it. For that reconnaissance mission I was allowed to pick one of the less purulent horses in the platoon. I hadn't gone out alone in a long time. It made me feel as if I were starting on a trip. But my feeling of deliverance was illusory. I was so tired when I set out that hard as I tried I couldn't properly visualize my own murder, I couldn't fill in the details. I moved from tree to tree, accompanied by the clanking of my hardware. All by itself my pretty saber made as much noise as a piano. I don't know if I was deserving of sympathy, but for sure I was certainly grotesque. What could General des Entrayes have been thinking, sending me out alone into that silence, all clothed in cymbals?

The Aztecs, so the story goes, routinely disemboweled eight thousand faithful a week in their temples of the sun, a sacrifice to the god of the clouds to make him send them rain. Such things are hard to believe until you get mixed up in a war. Once you're in a war, you see how it is: the Aztecs' contempt for other people's bodies was the same as my humble viscera must have inspired in our above-mentioned General Celadon des Entrayes, who, thanks to a series of promotions, had become a kind of chickenshit god, an abominably exigent little sun.

The one tiny bit of hope I had left was of being taken prisoner. It didn't amount to much, a shred. A shred in the night, because the circumstances weren't conducive to polite preliminaries, far from it. The foe would shoot first and introduce himself afterward. Besides, what would I say to this soldier, hostile by definition, who'd come from the other end of Europe for the express purpose of murdering me? … Suppose he hesitated for one second (that was all I'd need), what would I say to him? … And come to think of it, what would he be? A sales-clerk? … A professional soldier? … A gravedigger? … In civilian life … A cook? … Horses are lucky, they're stuck with the war same as us, but nobody expects them to be in favor of it, to pretend to believe in it. Unfortunate, yes, but free!

Enthusiasm, the stinker, was reserved for us!

I could see the road clearly just then and, plunked down on the mud beside it, big squares and cubes of houses, their walls whitened by the moonlight, like big unequal blocks of ice, pale and silent. Would this be the end of it all? How much time would I spend in this desolation after they'd done for me? Before it was all over? In what ditch? Beside which one of these walls? Would they come and finish me off? With a knife? Sometimes they gouged out your eyes, cut off your hands, and so on … There were all sorts of rumors on the subject, and they were no joke! A hoofbeat … Another … would be enough! … This beast makes a noise like two men with iron boots fastened together, running with a jerky, uneven step …

My heart, a rabbit, warm in its little rib cage, fearful, cowering, bewildered … You must feel pretty much the same way when you jump off the top of the Eiffel Tower. You'd like to stop yourself in mid-air.

That village kept its menace secret, but not entirely. In the center of a square a tiny fountain gurgled just for me.

That night I had everything to myself. I was the owner of the moon, the village, and of an enormous fear. I was about to break into a trot with a good hour's ride ahead of me to Noirceursur-la-Lys, when I caught sight of a well-veiled light over a door. I headed straight for that light, surprised to detect inside myself a kind of daring, a deserter's daring to be sure, but more than I'd ever suspected. The light disappeared the next second, but I'd seen it all right, I knocked, I kept at it, I knocked again, I called out in a loud voice, half in German, half in French to be on the safe side, to those strangers locked in the darkness. The door finally opened by just a crack.

A voice asked: “Who are you?” I was saved.

“A dragoon …”

“French?” A woman speaking. I could see her now …

“Yes, French …”

“Some German dragoons were here this afternoon … They spoke French too …”

“Yes, but I’m really French …”

“I see!”

She seemed to have her doubts.

“Where are they now?” I asked.

“They left at about eight o’clock, heading for Noirceur …” She pointed north. A young girl, shawl and white apron, emerged from the shadow.

“What did the Germans do to you?” I asked.

“They burned a house next to the town hall, and they killed my little brother, ran a lance through his belly … He was playing on the Red Bridge, watching them go by … Look!” She showed me. “There he is.”

She didn’t cry. She relit the candle, that was the light I had seen. At the back of the room I saw?it was true? the little corpse lying on a mattress; it was dressed in a sailor suit with a big square collar, the face and throat were as livid as the candlelight. The child’s arms and legs and back were bent, he was all doubled up. The lance had passed, like an axis for death, through the middle of his belly. His mother was on her knees beside him, crying her heart out. So was the father. Then they all started moaning at once. But my trouble was thirst.

“You wouldn’t have a bottle of wine to sell me?” I asked.

“You’ll have to ask my mother … She may know if there’s any left … The Germans took a lot just now …”

The two women talked it over in an undertone.

The daughter came back and announced: “There’s none left … the Germans took it all … We’d given them plenty without being asked, but even so …”

“Oh yes, they drank and they drank,” said the mother, who’d suddenly stopped crying.

“They’re crazy about it …”

“Must have been more than a hundred bottles,” said the father, still on his knees.

“And there’s not a single one left?” I kept at it, still hoping, because of my terrible thirst, especially for white wine with a good bitter tang that wakes you up a little. “I don’t mind paying …”

“There’s nothing left but the best!” the mother conceded. “It costs five francs a bottle.”

“That’s fine!” I said, taking a big five-franc piece out of my pocket.

“Go and get one!” she said to the sister in a whisper.

The sister took the candle and a moment later brought up a bottle from the hiding place. I had what I wanted, there was nothing more to stay for.

“Will they come back?” I asked, anxious again.

“Maybe!” they all said together. “If they do, they’ll burn everything in sight … They promised they would when they left …”

“I’ll just go and see what they’re up to!”

“You’re very brave … It’s that way,” said the father, pointing in the direction of Noirceursur-la-Lys … He even

stepped out on the road to see me on my way. The girl and her mother stayed behind, fearful, watching over the little corpse.

“Come back in!” they called out to him. “Joseph, come in. You’ve no business out there on the road …”

“You’re very brave!” the father said to me again, shaking me by the hand. I started off again, northward, at a trot.

“At least don’t tell them we’re still here!” The girl was shouting. She’d come out just for that.

“They’ll see for themselves tomorrow whether you’re here or not,” I called back. I wasn’t happy about giving them my five francs. There was five francs between us. Five francs is reason enough to hate people and make you want them dead … There won’t be any love to spare in this world as long as there’s five francs.

“Tomorrow!” they repeated, fearing the worst …

Tomorrow, for them too, was far away, there wasn’t much sense in that kind of tomorrow. The one thing any of us really cared about was living for one more hour, one more hour is a big deal in a world where everything has reduced itself to murder. I didn’t have far to go after that. I trotted from tree to tree, expecting to be challenged or shot from one minute to the next. Nothing happened.

It must have been about two in the morning, not much more, when I got to the top of a little hill, at a walk. Suddenly, looking down from there, I saw rows and rows of burning gas jets, and then in the foreground a station all lit up with its cars and its buffet, but not a sound came up to me … Nothing. Streets, avenues, street lamps, and more lights in parallel lines, whole neighborhoods, and everything else a black voracious void, with this city plunked down as if it had been lost, lying there all lit up in the heart and center of the darkness. I got down off my horse, made myself comfortable on a little hummock, and sat there looking at that city for quite some time.

That didn’t tell me if the Germans had moved into Noirceur, but since I knew that in a case like that they usually set fire, I figured if they’d moved in and hadn’t set fire to the place right away, they must have something very unusual up their sleeve.

No gunfire either. All very suspicious.

My horse wanted to lie down too. He tugged at his bridle and that made me turn around. When I turned back to the city, something about the look of the hummock in front of me had changed, not much, but enough to make me sing out: “Hey! Who goes there?” That change in the layout of the darkness had taken place a few steps away … Must be somebody there …

“Don’t shout too loud!” came a deep, hoarse voice, very French. “You lost too?” he asked me. Now I could see him, a foot slogger, the peak of his cap was cracked in “goodbye to the army” style. After all these years I remember that moment, his silhouette emerging from the grass the way targets used to in shooting galleries, soldier targets. We came closer. I was holding my revolver, for two beans I’d have fired, don’t ask why.

“Hey,” he asks. “You seen them?”

“No, but I’ve come here to see them.”

“You from the 145th Dragoons?”

“That’s right. You?”

“I’m a reservist …”

“Oh!” I said. That amazed me. He was the first reservist I’d met in the war. We’d always been in with the Regular Army men. I couldn’t see his face, but his voice was different from ours, sadder, which made him sound nicer. Because of that, I couldn’t help trusting him a little. Which was something.

“I’m fed up,” he said. “I’m going to get myself captured by the Boches …” He wasn’t keeping any secrets.

“How are you going about it?”

All of a sudden his plan interested me more than anything else. How was he fixing to get taken prisoner?

“I don’t know yet.”

“How’d you manage to get away? … It’s not easy to get taken prisoner.”

“To hell with that! I’ll just surrender.”

“What’s wrong? You scared?”

“I’m scared, and besides, the war is stupid. I don’t give a damn about the Germans, they never did anything to me …”

My feeling was that I should be polite to the Germans. I’d have liked this reservist to explain, while he was about it, why I had no stomach either to make war like everybody else … But he didn’t explain a thing, he just kept saying he was fed up. Then he told me how his regiment had been dispersed at dawn the day before because some of our sharpshooters had fired on his company by mistake. They hadn’t been expected just then, they’d arrived three hours ahead of schedule. So these sharpshooters, tired and taken by surprise, had fired across the fields and riddled them with bullets. I knew the story. I’d been through it myself.

“Never fear,” he went on. “I saw my chance, and I took it. Robinson, I says to myself?

Robinson’s my name, Leon Robinson?it’s now or never, I say to myself. This is the time to get going … Right? So I started through a little clump of woods and pretty soon, what do you think, I run into our captain … he’s leaning against a tree, in very bad shape! … Dying! … He was holding his pants in both hands and vomiting … Bleeding all over and rolling his eyes … There was nobody with him. He was through … ‘Mama! Mama!’ he was sniveling, all the while dying and pissing blood …

” ‘Shut up! I tell him. Mama! Mama! Fuck your mama!’ … Just like that, on my way past, out of the corner of my mouth! … I bet that made him feel good, the bastard! … What do you think of that! … It’s not every day you can tell the captain what you think … Too good to miss … A rare opportunity! … To get out of there faster I chucked my pack and gun … dropped ‘em in a duck pond … You see, I don’t take to killing people, I never learned to … even in peacetime, I never cared for fights … I’d walk away … See what I mean? … In civilian life I tried to go to the factory regularly … I was kind of an engraver, but I didn’t like it because of the arguments, I was happier selling the evening papers in a quiet neighborhood where I was known, around the Bank of France … Place des Victoires, if you want to know … Rue des Petits-Champs … that was my territory … I never went beyond the Rue du Louvre and the Palais-Royal on one side, get the idea? … In the morning I’d run errands for shopkeepers … sometimes a delivery in the afternoon, odd jobs, see? … kind of unskilled … But one thing I don’t want is weapons … If the Germans see you with a weapon, you’re cooked … But if you’re dressed free and easy like I am now … Nothing in your hands … nothing in your pockets … they get the idea that it won’t be hard to take you prisoner, see? They know who they’re dealing with … If you go up to the Germans mother naked, that would be even better … Like a horse! They wouldn’t know what army you belong to …”

“That’s a fact!”

I caught on that being older is good for the mind. It puts sense into you.

“So you say they’re down there?” We figured, we estimated our chances and looked for our future in the great luminous expanse of the silent city as though consulting the cards …

“Let’s get started!”

First we’d have to cross the railroad tracks. If there were sentries, they’d see us. Or maybe they wouldn’t. We’d soon find out. Maybe there’d be an overpass, or maybe we’d take the tunnel.

“We’ll have to hurry,” said Robinson … “Gotta do these things at night, people aren’t friendly in the daytime, everybody plays to the gallery in the daytime, even in the war, the daytime is a circus … You taking your horse?”

I took the horse. A precaution … to get away quicker if the reception was bad. We got to the grade crossing, the big red and white arms were up. I’d never seen that kind of gate before. They weren’t like that around Paris.

“Think they’ve moved in already?”

“Positive!” he says. “Anyway, keep going.”

Now we were forced to be as brave as the brave, because of the horse who was plodding slowly behind us and

seemed to be pushing us with his noise, we couldn't hear anything else. Clop! clop! went his hooves. He'd put his foot down in the middle of the echo, as if he hadn't a care in the world.

So this Robinson was counting on the night to save us … The two of us were walking down the middle of the street, with no attempt at concealment, in step what's more, we could have been drilling …

Robinson was right, the daytime was pitiless, from the earth to the sky. The way we were walking in the street, we must have looked perfectly harmless, as innocent as if we'd been coming back from a leave. "Did you hear about the 1st Hussars, taken prisoner in Lille, every last one of them … Marched right in … the way I heard it … they didn't know … the colonel in the lead … Down the main street, boy oh boy! … And then the trap closed! … In front of them … behind them … Germans everywhere! … At the windows! … Everywhere! … There they were! … Caught like rats! … Like rats! Talk about luck!"

"The bastards!"

"Yeah, wasn't that something! …" We couldn't get over that marvelous capture, so neat, so conclusive … It really floored us … The shops had all their shutters closed, so did the houses, with their little gardens in front, all so neat and prim. But after the post office we saw a house, a little whiter than the rest, with all the lights on at all the windows, upstairs and down. We went and rang the doorbell, we still had our horse behind us. A thickset man with a beard opened. "I am the mayor of Noirceur," he told us right away without our asking, "and I am expecting the Germans!" This mayor steps out into the moonlight to look at us. When he saw we weren't Germans but still French, he wasn't so solemn any more. Friendly yes, but embarrassed. Obviously he hadn't been expecting us, we didn't quite fit in with the arrangements he must have made, the decisions he'd taken. The Germans were supposed to enter Noirceur that night, he'd been notified and he'd settled everything with the Prefecture, their colonel here, their field hospital there, *etc.* And what if they turned up now? With us there? There'd certainly be trouble! Dreadful complications! … He didn't come out and say all that, but we could see what he was thinking.

So there in the darkness he starts talking to us about the interests of the public at large … in that enveloping silence … the public at large, that's all he would talk about … the material interests of the community … the artistic patrimony of Noirceur, entrusted to his care, a sacred trust if ever there was one … especially the fifteenth century church … suppose they burned it down! … like the one in Condé-sur-Yser! … Had we thought of that? … In a fit of temper … annoyed at finding us there … He impressed us with the full extent of our responsibility … harebrained youngsters that we were! … the Germans had no use for unsavory towns with enemy soldiers still prowling around in them. That was common knowledge …

While he was lecturing us like that in an undertone, his wife and two daughters, luscious hefty blondes, put in a word here and there to back him up … The long and the short, they didn't want us there … In the air between us there hovered sentimental and archaeological considerations, suddenly sprung to life since there was no one in Noirceur that night to contest them … patriotic, ethical, word-propelled considerations, ghosts that the mayor tried to hold fast, but they faded away, undone by our fear and selfishness, and by the plain truth for that matter.

The mayor of Noirceur himself was knocking himself out with his touching effort to convince us that our Duty was to clear out instantly … he wasn't as brutal about it as our Major Pinçon, but in his way he was every bit as determined.

The only argument we could have pitted against all those wielders of power was our contemptible little wish not to die and not to be burned alive. Which didn't amount to much, especially when you consider that you can't come out with sentiments like that in the middle of a war. So we wandered off into other deserted streets. Everyone I'd met that night had bared his soul to me.

"Just my luck!" said Robinson as we were pushing off. "If only you'd been a German, you're an obliging sort, you'd have taken me prisoner and we'd be all set … It's hard for a man to get rid of himself in a war!"

"What about you?" said I. "Wouldn't *you* have taken *me* prisoner if you had been a German? Maybe they'd have given you the Médaille Militaire! Some funny word the Germans must have for their Médaille Militaire …"

Seeing there was absolutely no demand for us as prisoners, we finally sat down on a bench in a little park and opened up the can of tuna fish Robinson had been warming in his pocket since morning. Now we could hear gunfire far in the distance, very far. If only both sides could have stayed in the distance where they were and left us alone!

Then we walked by the river, and alongside of some half-unloaded barges we urinated long streams into the

water … We were still leading the horse by the bridle, he tagged behind us like a great big dog … Near the bridge, in the ferryman's one-room house, there was a dead man stretched out on a mattress all alone, a Frenchman, a major of light cavalry, actually he looked something like Robinson.

"Ugly son of a bitch!" says Robinson. "I don't know about you, but I don't like dead people."

"The funny part of it," I said, "is that he looks something like you. The same long nose, and you're not much older …"

"Well, you see, it's being so tired that makes us all look alike, but oh if you'd seen me before! … In the days when I went bicycle riding every Sunday! … I was really handsome!

You should have seen the calves on me! You can't beat bicycling! It develops the thighs too …"

We left the house, the match we'd lit to look at the stiff had gone out.

"You see? … it's too late … you see?"

Already, in the darkness at the end of the town, a long gray and green line marked the crest of the hill: Day! One more! One less! We'd have to try and get through this one the same as the rest, the days had got to be like hoops, tighter and tighter to get through, and filled with bursts of shrapnel.

"Coming back this way tomorrow night?" he asked before we separated.

"Tomorrow night? There's no such thing … What do you think you are, a general?"

"I don't think about anything," he says. "No thoughts at all! I think about not getting killed … that keeps me busy … One more day is one more day?that's what I think!"

"You're right … So long, pal, and good luck!"

"Good luck to you too! Maybe we'll meet again!"

We each went back to his own war. And then things happened, and a lot more things that it's not easy to tell about now, because people nowadays wouldn't understand them anymore.

4

If you wanted to be respected and looked up to, you had to hurry up quick and pal up with the civilians, because they were becoming more and more vicious as the war went on. I saw that as soon as I got back to Paris. It also became clear to me that the women had ants in their pants and that the old men were talking big, and their fingers were all over the place, in assholes, in pockets …

The civilians back home were infected with the idea of glory, they picked it up from the soldier boys and soon learned how to bear up under it, bravely and painlessly. Nurses and martyrs by turns, mothers were never without their long dark veils and those little diplomas the Ministry never failed to send by special messenger. In short, the home front was getting organized.

At a well-conducted funeral, you're sad too, but you think of other things, the will, your next vacation, the widow, who's a good-looker and said to be passionate, and your plans for continuing to live a great deal longer by contrast, and maybe never dying … You never can tell.

And as you follow the hearse, everybody lifts his hat to you. It's heart-warming. Then's the time to behave properly, to look dignified, not to laugh out loud, to gloat only internally. That's permissible. Everything's permissible internally.

During the war, instead of dancing on the mezzanine, you danced in the cellar. The boys had no objection, in fact they were all for it. They demanded it as soon as they got to town, and nobody thought it indecent. The one thing that's really indecent is bravery. You expect physical bravery? Then ask a worm to be brave, he's pink and pale and soft, just like us. For my part, I had nothing to complain of. Actually, thanks to the Médaille Militaire I'd won and my wound and all, I was about to lose my innocence. They'd brought me the medal while I was in the hospital convalescing. And that same night I went to the theater, to let the civilians see it during intermissions. A triumph! Those were the first medals seen in Paris. It floored them!

That was when I met little Lola from America in the lobby of the Opéra-Comique, and it was thanks to her that I really found out what was what.

There are certain dates that stand out after months and months when you might just as well have been dead. That evening at the Opera-Comique with my medal was a turning point in my life.

Lola made me curious about the United States, because of the questions I started asking right away and that she hardly answered at all. When you start traveling that way, you never know when or how you'll get back …

At the time I'm speaking of, everybody in Paris wanted a uniform. Practically nobody was without one, except neutrals and spies, which to all intents and purposes were identical. Lola had a genuine official uniform, and it was really natty, decorated with little crosses all over, on the sleeves and on the tiny cap that she perched at a rakish angle on her wavy hair. She'd come to help us save France, as she told the hotel manager, to the best of her humble ability but with all her heart! We understood each other right away, but not completely, because the transports of the heart were beginning to give me a pain, I was more interested in the transports of the body. You can't trust the heart, not at all. I'd learned that in the war, and I wasn't going to forget it in a hurry.

Lola's heart was tender, weak, and enthusiastic. Her body was sweet, it was adorable, so what could I do but take her all together as she was? Lola was a good kid all right, but between us stood the war, the monstrous frenzy that was driving half of humanity, lovers or not, to send the other half to the slaughterhouse. Naturally this interfered with our relationship. For me, who was dragging out my convalescence as long as possible and wasn't the least bit eager to go back on duty in the flaming graveyards of no man's land, the absurdity of our massacre was glaringly obvious at every step I took in town. Whichever way I looked, I saw cynical grasping cunning.

Still, I hadn't much chance of keeping out of it, I lacked the indispensable connections. The people I knew were all poor, people whose death is of no interest to anybody. And I could hardly count on Lola to keep me safe at home. Even if she was a nurse, I couldn't have conceived of anyone more bellicose than that sweet young thing? except maybe Ortolan. If I hadn't been through the muddy fricassee of heroism myself, her little Joan of Arc number might have stirred and converted me, but since my enlistment on the Place Clichy I had grown phobically allergic to heroism, verbal or real. I was cured. Radically cured. For the convenience of the ladies of the American Expeditionary Force, the group of nurses Lola belonged to were quartered in the Hôtel Paritz and, to make things even more delightful for her personally, she had been put in charge (she had connections) of a special service, whose mission it was to supply the Paris hospitals with apple fritters. Every

morning thousands of dozens of them were handed out. Lola performed this benign duty with a touching zeal, which, as it turned out, was later to have disastrous consequences. Lola, it has to be admitted, had never made a fritter in all her life. She therefore hired a number of mercenary cooks, and after a few trials the fritters were ready for delivery, as juicy and sweet and golden as anyone could wish for. All Lola actually had to do was taste them before they were delivered to the various hospital wards. Every morning Lola got up at the stroke of ten, took her bath, and went down to the kitchens, which were situated deep in the basement. This, I repeat, she did every morning, clad only in a black-and-yellow Japanese kimono that a boyfriend in San Francisco had given her the day before she left. In short, everything was running smoothly, and we were happily winning the war, when one fine day at lunch I found her shattered, refusing to touch so much as a single dish. I was seized with foreboding: what misfortune or sudden illness had befallen her? I begged her to entrust herself to my watchful affection.

After conscientiously tasting fritters every day for a month Lola had put on two pounds!

Her little belt bore witness to the disaster, she found herself obliged to move on to the next notch. She burst into tears. I did my best to comfort her. In a turmoil of emotion we repaired by taxi to several pharmacies, situated at a considerable distance from one another. The scales proved implacable. As ill luck would have it, they all confirmed that two pounds had indeed and undeniably been gained. I suggested that she turn her job over to a friend who, on the contrary, was eager to enlarge her allurements. Lola wouldn't hear of such a compromise, which she regarded as shameful, as a kind of desertion. That, I recall, is when she told me that her great-great uncle had been a member of the crew of the eternally glorious *Mayflower* which landed in Boston in 1677, and that in view of such a past she couldn't dream of shirking her fritter duty, which may have been humble but was nevertheless a sacred trust.

The fact remains that from that day on she barely touched her teeth?which, incidentally, were evenly set and very very enticing?to the fritters. Her dread of putting on weight completely destroyed her enjoyment of life. She began to waste away. Soon she was as afraid of fritters as I was of bullets. Because of the fritters we spent most of our time taking long healthful walks on the riverbanks and boulevards, and we stopped going to the Napolitain, because ice cream is another thing that makes ladies put on weight. I had never dreamed of a place so comfortable to live in as her room, all pale blue with a bathroom adjoining. Photographs of her friends were all over, with dedications, not many women, lots of men, handsome, dark with curly hair, that was her type, she'd talk to me about the color of their eyes and read me the dedications, which were tender, solemn, and every last one of them absolutely irrevocable. At first those effigies embarrassed me, I felt I was being rude, but then I got used to it,

The moment I stopped kissing her, I was in for it, she'd start on the war and her fritters. France figured prominently in our conversation. To Lola's way of thinking, France was some sort of chivalric being, not very clearly defined in space or time, but at the moment dangerously wounded and for that very reason too too exciting. When anybody mentioned France to me, I instantly thought of my guts, so I wasn't nearly so open to patriotic ardor. Each man to his fears. Nevertheless, since she was sexually accommodating, I listened and never contradicted her. But when it came to my soul, she wasn't at all satisfied with me. She'd have liked to see me bubbling and bursting with enthusiasm, whereas I couldn't see a single reason for adopting that sublime state of mind, in fact I could see a thousand, all equally irrefutable, for persevering in the exact opposite disposition. Obviously Lola was nuts with happiness and optimism, like all people on the good side of life, the ones with privilege, health, security, who still have a long time to live. She kept bothering me with the soul, she was always going on about it. The soul is the body's vanity and pleasure as long as the body's in good health, but it's also the urge to escape from the body as soon as the body is sick or things are going badly. Of the two poses, you take the one that suits you best at the moment, and that's all there is to it! As long as you can choose between the two, you're all right. But I couldn't choose anymore, my die was cast! I was up to my neck in the truth; death dogged my every step, so to speak. It was very hard for me to think of anything but my suspended sentence to be murdered, a fate which everyone else regarded as just the right thing for me.

In this kind of deferred death agony that hits you when you're lucid and in good health, the mind is open to nothing but absolute truths. Once you've been through it, you'll know what you're talking about till the end of your days.

My conclusion was that if the Germans were to come and pillage, massacre, and burn everything in sight, the hotel, the fritters, Lola, the Tuileries, the cabinet ministers, their little boyfriends, the Coupole, the Louvre, the department stores, if they were to swoop down on the city and unleash the wrath of God and the fires of hell on this putrid carnival, to which nothing in the way of sordidness could possibly be added, I would have nothing to lose and everything to gain.

You don't lose much when the landlord's house burns down. Another landlord will always turn up, unless it's

the same one, German or French, English or Chinese, to collect the rent … In marks or francs? What difference does it make, seeing you've got to pay … In short, my morale was low. If I'd told Lola what I thought of the war, she'd have taken me for a monster and banished me from the ultimate joys of her boudoir. So I was careful to keep my sentiments to myself. Besides, I had outside difficulties and rivalries to worry about. Quite a few officers were trying to filch her away from me. Their competition was redoubtable, armed as they were with the seduction of their Legions of Honor. And just then the American papers were beginning to be full of this damned Legion of Honor. She cuckolded me two or three times, and I'd go so far to say that our relationship would have been in serious danger on those occasions, if it hadn't dawned on her that I could be put to a higher use, namely, made to taste the fritters every morning in her stead. This last-minute specialization saved me. She could accept me as a substitute, for I was a valiant comrade-in-arms, hence worthy of so sacred a mission. From that moment on we were more than lovers, we were partners as well. The modern age had dawned. To me her body was a joy without end. I never wearied of exploring that American body. I have to admit that I was a terrible lecher. I still am.

And I formed the pleasant and fortifying conviction that a country capable of producing bodies so daringly graceful, so tempting in their spiritual flights, must have countless other vital revelations to offer, of a biological nature, it goes without saying. I made up my mind, while feeling and fondling Lola, that sooner or later I'd take a trip, or call it a pilgrimage, to the United States, the sooner the better. And the fact is that I knew neither peace nor rest (in an implacably adverse and harassed life) until I managed to go through with that profound and mystically anatomical adventure.

So it was in the immediate vicinity of Lola's rear end that I received the message of a new world. Of course Lola wasn't all body, she also had a wee little face that was adorable and just a bit cruel because of her gray-blue eyes that slanted slightly upward at the corners like a wildcat's.

Just looking at her made my mouth water, like a sip of dry wine, that flinty taste. There was a hardness in her eyes, unrelieved by the amiably commercial orientalo-Fragonard vivacity you find in nearly all the eyes in these parts.

We usually met in a cafe nearby. There were more and more wounded men hobbling through the streets, many of them very bedraggled. Collections were taken for their benefit,

"days" for this group and "days" for that group, especially for the organizers of the "days." Lying, fucking, dying. A law had just been passed prohibiting all other activity. The lies that were being told surpassed the imagination, far exceeded the limits of the absurd and preposterous?in the newspapers, on posters, on foot, on horseback, on pleasure boats. Everybody was doing it. In competition, to see who could lie the most outrageously. Soon there wasn't a bit of truth in the city.

The little that had been left in 1914, people were ashamed of now. Everything you touched was phony, the sugar, the aeroplanes, the shoes, the jam, the photographs … Everything you read, swallowed, sucked, admired, proclaimed, refuted, defended was made up of hateridden myths and grinning masquerades, phony to the hilt. The mania for telling lies and believing them is as contagious as the itch. Little Lola's French consisted of only a few phrases, but they were all patriotic: *"On les aura! … ," "Madelon, viens! …"* It was enough to make you cry.

Stubbornly, shamelessly she harped on the deaths of those doomed to die, actually all the women did, as soon as it became fashionable to be brave for other people. Just as I was looking within and discovering such an extraordinary taste for everything that took me away from the war! I often asked Lola questions about America, but her answers were vague, pretentious, and manifestly unreliable, calculated to make a brilliant impression on me. But by that time I distrusted impressions. I'd been taken in once by an impression, and nobody was going to hoodwink me again. Nobody.

I believed in her body, I didn't believe in her soul. I thought of Lola as a charming goldbrick, miles away from the war, miles away from life.

She flitted across my nightmare with the mentality of the patriotic press: the poilus in the trenches, our own Lorraine, the cadets in their white gloves … In the meantime I made love to her more and more, I'd convinced her it was a good way to lose weight. But she set more store by our long walks. I hated long walks. But she insisted.

So we spent several hours every afternoon being athletic in the Bois de Boulogne, walking around the lakes and back.

Nature is a frightening thing … Even when it's solidly domesticated as in the Bois, it gives real city dwellers

an eerie, anxious feeling. And that puts them in a confiding mood. The Bois de Boulogne may be damp, fenced in, greasy, and trampled, but there's nothing like it for sending memories rushing irresistibly to the minds of city dwellers strolling under the trees. Lola was not immune to that melancholy, confidential anxiety. As we walked along she told me, more or less truthfully, a thousand things about her life in New York and her little girlfriends over there.

I couldn't quite make out how much of the potpourri of dollars, engagements, divorces, dresses, and jewelry that seemed to have made up her existence was worth trying to believe.

That day we headed for the race track. In those days and that neck of the woods you still saw lots of horse-drawn carriages, children on donkeys, other children kicking up dust, and cars full of soldiers on furlough, always in desperate haste, between two trains, to track down the women strolling on the side paths, raising more dust in their hurry to go to dinner and make love, jumpy, oily, peering this way and that, tormented by the implacable clock and the lust for life. They sweated with passion, but also with the heat. The Bois wasn't as well cared for as usual, it was neglected, in a state of administrative suspense.

"It must have been pretty here before the war," Lola observed … "So chic! … Oh, tell me about it, Ferdinand! … Your races here … Were they like ours in New York?" To tell the truth, I'd never been to the races before the war, but to amuse her I instantly made up dozens of colorful details, drawing on stories various people had told me. The toilettes … the ladies of fashion … The gleaming carriages … The start! … The joyous, imperious horns … The water jump … The President of the Republic … The undulant betting fever, *etc.*

My idealized account was so much to her liking that it brought us together. At that moment Lola seemed to discover that we had at least one taste in comon, well concealed in my case, namely, a taste for social functions. She went so far as to kiss me in a burst of spontaneous emotion, something, I have to admit, that she seldom did. And then she was touched by the sadness of bygone fashions. Everyone has his own way of mourning the passage of time. It was through dead fashions that Lola perceived the flight of the years.

"Ferdinand," she asked, "do you think there will be races here again?"

"When the war is over, Lola, I should think …"

"We can't be sure, can we?"

"No, we can't be sure."

The possibility that there would never again be races at Longchamp overwhelmed her. The sadness of the world has different ways of getting to people, but it seems to succeed almost every time.

"Suppose, Ferdinand, suppose the war goes on a long time, maybe for years … Then it'll be too late for me … to come back here … Do you understand, Ferdinand? … You know how I love beautiful places like this … so grand, so chic … It'll be too late … Forever too late … Maybe … Maybe I'll be old, Ferdinand … When the races start up again … I'll be old … You'll see, Ferdinand, it will be too late … I can feel it will be too late , , ." She was as desolate as if she'd put on two more pounds. I said everything I could think of to comfort her and give her hope … She was only twenty-three after all … The war would be over soon, oh very soon … Good times would come again … as good as before, even better … For her at least … being so adorable … the lost years … she'd catch up with no harm done … She wouldn't run short of admirers … so soon … To please me she pretended she wasn't sad anymore.

"Do we have to keep walking?" she asked.

"Your weight! …"

"Oh, that's right, I'd forgotten …"

We left Longchamp, the children had gone. Nothing left but dust. The furlough boys were still chasing Happiness, but no longer in the copses, the pursuit of Happiness had moved to the cafe terraces around the Porte Maillot.

We headed for Saint-Cloud along the riverbank, shrouded in a dancing halo of autumn mists. As we approached the bridge, some barges loaded to the gunwales with coal and lying low in the water were thrusting their noses under the arches … Above the fences the park deployed a great fan of greenery. Those trees are as vast and gentle and strong as dreams. But trees were something else I distrusted, ever since I'd been ambushed. Behind every tree a dead man. Between two lines of roses the avenue, rising gently, led to the fountains. Outside the kiosk the soda-water lady seemed to be slowly gathering the evening shadows around

her skirt. Further on, along the side paths, great cubes and rectangles of dark-colored canvas were flapping, carnival booths, which the war had taken by surprise and suddenly filled with silence.

“It’s been a whole year since they went away!” the soda-water lady told us. “You won’t see two people here in a whole day now … I come out of habit … There used to be so many people! …”

That was all the old lady knew, the rest of what had happened was a blank to her. Lola wanted to go and look at the empty tents, one of those funny sad impulses. We counted about twenty of them, a long one full of mirrors and a lot of small ones, candy stands, lotteries, even a small theater traversed with drafts. There was a tent in every space between the trees; one of them, near the Grand Avenue, had lost its flaps, it was as well ventilated as a punctured mystery.

These tents were leaning close to the mud and fallen leaves. We stopped near the last, the one that was bent lowest, it was pitching on its poles like a ship in the wind, with wildly flapping sails ready to snap the last of its cables. It swayed in the rising wind, a sheet of canvas flew up above the roof and flapped and flapped. The old name of the stand was written on the front in green and red letters; it had been a shooting gallery, the Gallery of the Nations. There was no one to take care of it now. Maybe the owner had gone shooting with the rest of them, with his customers.

What a lot of bullets the little targets in the stand had taken! All of them riddled with little white dots! A wedding, that always got a laugh out of them: tin figures in the first row, the bride with her flowers, the cousin, the soldier, the groom with a big red face, and in the second row the guests, who must have been killed a good many times when the carnival was still operating.

“I bet you’re a good shot, aren’t you, Ferdinand? If the carnival were still running, I’d challenge you … You are a good shot, aren’t you, Ferdinand?”

“No, I’m not a very good shot …”

In the last row behind the wedding, another row was daubed in, the town hall with its flag. People must have shot at the town hall, too, when the gallery was working, at the windows, they’d open and a bell would clang, and they even shot at the little tin flag. And they’d shot at the regiment marching on an incline nearby, like mine on the Place Clichy, this one was between the pipes and the little balloons. People had shot at those things for all they were worth, and now they were shooting at me, yesterday and tomorrow.

“They’re shooting at me, too, Lola!” I cried. It slipped out of me.

“Let’s be going,” she said … “You’re talking nonsense, Ferdinand, and we’ll catch cold.” We descended the main avenue, the Avenue Royale, toward Saint-Cloud, avoiding the mud. She held me by the hand, hers was tiny, but I couldn’t think of anything but the tin wedding at the shooting gallery up there, which we had left behind us in the shadow of the trees. I even forgot to kiss Lola, something had come over me, I felt very funny. I think it was then that my head became so agitated, with all the ideas going around in it. It was dark when we got to the Pont de Saint-Cloud.

“Ferdinand, would you like to have dinner at Duval’s? You like Duval’s, don’t you … It would cheer you up … There’s always such a big crowd … Unless you’s rather eat in my room … ,” She was being very considerate that evening.

We finally decided on Duval’s. But we’d hardly sat down when the place struck me as monstrous. I got the idea that these people sitting in rows around us were waiting for bullets to be fired at them from all sides while they were eating.

“Get out!” I warned them. “Beat it! They’re going to shoot! They’re going to kill you! The whole lot of you!”

I was hurried back to Lola’s hotel! Everywhere I saw the same thing … The people in the hallways of the Paritz all seemed to be on their way to be shot and so did the clerks behind the big desk, all of them just ripe for it, and the character down at the door with his uniform as blue as the sky and as golden as the sun, the doorman, and the officers and generals walking this way and that not nearly so gorgeous of course, but in uniform all the same, all ripe to be shot, there’d be shooting from every side, no one would escape, not this one, not that or the other. The time for joking was past …

“They’re going to shoot!” I yelled at the top of my lungs in the middle of the lobby.

“They’re going to shoot! Beat it, all of you! …” I went to the window and shouted some more. What a disturbance! “Poor soldier boy!” the people said. The concierge led me gently to the bar, by suasion. He gave

me something to drink and I drank quite a lot, and then the M.P.'s came and took me away, not so gently. There'd been M.P.'s at the Gallery of the Nations, too. I'd seen them. Lola kissed me and helped them to take me away with their handcuffs.

Then I fell sick, I was delirious, driven mad by fear, they said at the hospital. Maybe so. The best thing to do when you're in this world, don't you agree, is to get out of it. Crazy or not, scared or not.

5

There was quite a commotion. Some people said: “That young fellow’s an anarchist, they’ll shoot him, the sooner the better … Can’t let the grass grow under our feet with a war on! … But there were others, more patient, who thought I was just syphilitic and sincerely insane, they consequently wanted me to be locked up until the war was over or at least for several months, because they, who claimed to be sane and in their right minds, wanted to take care of me while they carried on the war all by themselves. Which proves that if you want people to think you’re normal there’s nothing like having an all-fired nerve. If you’ve got plenty of nerve, you’re all set, because then you’re entitled to do practically anything at all, you’ve got the majority on your side, and it’s the majority who decide what’s crazy and what isn’t.

Even so my diagnosis was very doubtful. So the authorities decided to put me under observation for a while. My little friend Lola had permission to visit me now and then, and so did my mother. That was all.

We, the befogged wounded, were lodged in a secondary school at Issy-les-Moulineaux, especially rigged to take in soldiers like me, whose patriotism was either impaired or dangerously sick, and get us by cajolery or force to confess. The treatment wasn’t really bad, but we felt we were being watched every minute of the day by the staff of silent male nurses endowed with enormous ears.

After a varying period of observation, we’d be quietly sent away and assigned to an insane asylum, the front, or, not infrequently, the firing squad.

Among the comrades assembled in that suspect institution, I always wondered while listening to them talking in whispers in the mess hall, which ones might be on the point of becoming ghosts.

In her little cottage near the gate dwelt the concierge, who sold us barley sugar and oranges as well as the wherewithal for sewing on buttons. She also sold us pleasure. For noncoms the price of pleasure was ten francs. Everybody could have it. But watch your step, because men tend to get too confiding on such occasions. An expansive moment could cost you dearly. Whatever was confided to her she repeated in detail to the Chief Medical Officer, and it went into your court-martial record. It seemed reliably established that she’d had a corporal of Spahis, a youngster still in his teens, shot for his confidences, as well as a reservist in the corps of engineers, who had swallowed nails to put his stomach out of commission, and a hysteric, who had described his method of staging a paralytic seizure at the front. One evening, to sound me out, she offered me the identification papers of a father of six, who was dead, so she told me, saying they might help me to a rear echelon assignment … In short, she was a snake. In bed, though, she was superb, we came back again and again, and the pleasure she purveyed was real. She may have been a slut, but at least she was a real one. To give royal pleasure they’ve got to be. In the kitchens of love, after all, vice is like the pepper in a good sauce; it brings out the flavor, it’s indispensable. The school buildings opened out on a big terrace, golden in summer, surrounded by trees, with a magnificent panoramic view of Paris. It was there that our visitors waited for us on Thursdays, including Lola, as regular as clockwork, bringing cakes, advice, and cigarettes. We saw our doctors every morning. They questioned us amiably enough, but we never knew exactly what they were thinking. Under their affable smiles as they walked among us, they carried our death sentences.

The mealy-mouthed atmosphere reduced some of the patients under observation, more emotional than the rest, to such a state of exasperation that at night, instead of sleeping, they paced the ward from end to end, loudly protesting against their own anguish, convulsed between hope and despair, as on a dangerous mountain spur. For days and days they suffered, and then suddenly one night they’d go to pieces, run to the Chief Medical Officer, and confess everything. They’d never be seen again. I wasn’t easy in my mind myself. But when you’re weak, the best way to fortify yourself is to strip the people you fear of the last bit of prestige you’re still inclined to give them. Learn to consider them as they are, worse than they are in fact and from every point of view. That will release you, set you free, protect you more than you can possibly imagine. It will give you another self. There will be two of you.

That will strip their words and deeds of the obscene mystical fascination that weakens you and makes you waste your time. From then on you’ll find their act no more amusing, no more relevant to your inner progress than that of the lowliest pig.

Beside me, in the next bed, there was a corporal, a volunteer like me. Up until August he had been a teacher at a secondary school in Touraine, teaching history and geography, so he told me. After a few months in the front lines this teacher had turned out to be a champion thief. Nothing could stop him from stealing canned goods from the regimental supply train, the quartermaster trucks, the company stores, and anywhere else he could find them. So he’d landed there with the rest of us, while presumably awaiting court martial. But since his family persisted in trying to prove that he had been stupefied and demoralized by shell shock, the

prosecution deferred his trial from month to month. He didn't talk to me very much. He spent hours combing his beard, but when he spoke to me it was almost always about the same thing, about the method he had discovered for not getting his wife with any more children. Was he really insane? At a time when the world is upside down and it's thought insane to ask why you're being murdered, it obviously requires no great effort to pass for a lunatic. Of course your act has got to be convincing, but when it comes to keeping out of the big slaughterhouse, some people's imaginations become magnificently fertile.

Everything that's important goes on in the darkness, no doubt about it. We never know anyone's real inside story.

This teacher's name was Princhard. What can the man have dreamed up to save his carotids, lungs, and optic nerves? That was the crucial question, the question we men should have asked one another if we'd wanted to be strictly human and rational. Far from it, we staggered along in a world of idealistic absurdities, hemmed in by insane, bellicose platitudes. Like smoke-maddened rats we tried to escape from the burning ship, but we had no general plan, no faith in one another. Dazed by the war, we had developed a different kind of madness: fear. The heads and tails of the war.

In the midst of the general delirium, this Princhard took a certain liking to me, though he distrusted me of course.

In the place and situation we were in, friendship and trust were out of the question. No one revealed any more than he thought useful for his survival, since everything or practically everything was sure to be repeated by some attentive stool pigeon.

From time to time one of us disappeared. That meant the case against him was ready and the court-martial would sentence him to a disciplinary battalion, to the front, or, if he was very lucky, to the Insane Asylum in Clamart.

More dubious warriors kept arriving, from every branch of service, some very young, some almost old, some terrified, some ranting and swaggering. Their wives and parents came to see them, and their children too, staring wide-eyed, on Thursdays. They all wept buckets in the visiting room, especially in the evening. All the helplessness of a world at war wept when the visits were over and the women and children left, dragging their feet in the bleak gas-lit corridor. A herd of sniveling riffraff, that's what they were; disgusting.

To Lola it was still an adventure, coming to see me in that prison, as you might have called it. We two didn't cry. Where would we have got our tears from?

"Is it true that you've gone mad, Ferdinand?" she asked me one Thursday.

"It's true," I admitted.

"But they'll treat you here?"

"There's no treatment for fear, Lola."

"Is it as bad as all that?"

"It's worse, Lola. My fear is so bad that if I die a natural death later on, I especially don't want to be cremated. I want them to leave me in the ground, quietly rotting in the graveyard, ready to come back to life … Maybe … how do we know? But if they burned me to ashes, Lola, don't you see, it would be over, really over … A skeleton, after all, is still something like a man … It's more likely to come back to life than ashes … Reduced to ashes, you're finished! … What do you think? … Naturally the war …"

"Oh, Ferdinand! Then you're an absolute coward! You're as loathsome as a rat …"

"Yes, an absolute coward, Lola, I reject the war and everything in it … I don't deplore it … I don't resign myself to it … I don't weep about it … I just plain reject it and all its fighting men. I don't want anything to do with them or it. Even if there were nine hundred and ninety-five million of them and I were all alone, they'd still be wrong and I'd be right. Because I'm the one who knows what I want: I don't want to die."

"But it's not possible to reject the war, Ferdinand! Only crazy people and cowards reject the war when their country is in danger …"

"If that's the case, hurrah for the crazy people! Look, Lola, do you remember a single name, for instance, of any of the soldiers killed in the Hundred Years War? … Did you ever try to find out who any of them were? …

No! … You see? You never tried … As far as you're concerned they're as anonymous, as indifferent, as the last atom of that paperweight, as your morning bowel movement … Get it into your head, Lola, that they died for nothing!

For absolutely nothing, the idiots! I say it and I'll say it again! I've proved it! The one thing that counts is life! In ten thousand years, I'll bet you, this war, remarkable as it may seem to us at present, will be utterly forgotten … Maybe here and there in the world a handful of scholars will argue about its causes or the dates of the principal hecatombs that made it famous … Up until now those are the only things about men that other men have thought worth remembering after a few centuries, a few years, or even a few hours … I don't believe in the future, Lola …"

When she heard me flaunting my shameful state like that, she lost all sympathy for me … Once and for all she put me down as contemptible, and decided to leave me without further ado. It was too much. When I left her that evening at the hospital gate, she didn't kiss me. Evidently the thought that a condemned man might have no vocation for death was too much for her. When 1 asked her how our pancakes were doing, she did not reply. On my return to the dormitory, I found Princhard at the window with a crowd of soldiers around him. He was trying out a pair of dark glasses on the gas light. The idea, he explained, had come to him last summer at the seashore, and since it was summer now, he was planning to wear them next day in the park. That park was enormous and exceedingly well policed by squads of vigilant orderlies. The next day Princhard insisted on my going for a walk on the terrace with him to try out his beautiful glasses. A blazing afternoon beat down on him, defended by his opaque lenses. I noticed that his nose was almost transparent at the nostrils and that he was breathing hard.

"My friend," he confided, "time is passing and it's not on my side. My conscience is immune to remorse, I have been relieved, thank God, of those fears … It's not crimes that count in this world … people stopped counting them long ago … What counts is blunders … And I believe I've made one … that's absolutely irremediable …"

"Stealing canned goods?"

"Yes, just imagine … I thought I was being so clever … My idea was to abstract myself from the battle and return, disgraced but still alive, to peace, as one returns, exhausted, to the surface of the sea after a long dive … I almost succeeded … but this war, undoubtedly, has been going on too long … So long that cannon fodder disgusting enough to disgust the Patrie is no longer conceivable … She has begun to accept every offering, regardless of where it comes from, every variety of meat! Today there's no such thing as a soldier unworthy to bear arms and, above all, to die under arms and by arms … They're going, latest news, to make a hero out of me! … How imperious the homicidal madness must have become if they're willing to pardon? no, to forget!? the theft of a can of meat! True, we have got into the habit of admiring colossal bandits, whose opulence is revered by the entire world, yet whose existence, once we stop to examine it, proves to be one long crime repeated ad infinitum, but those same bandits are heaped with glory, honors, and power, their crimes are hallowed by the law of the land, whereas, as far back in history as the eye can see? and history, as you know, is my business? everything conspires to show that a venial theft, especially of inglorious foodstuffs, such as bread crusts, ham, or cheese, unfailingly subjects its perpetrator to irreparable opprobium, the categoric condemnation of the community, major punishment, automatic dishonor, and inexpiable shame, and this for two reasons, first because the perpetrator of such an offense is usually poor, which in itself connotes basic unworthiness, and secondly because his act implies, as it were, a tacit reproach to the community. A poor man's theft is seen as a malicious attempt at individual redress … Where would we be? Note accordingly that in all countries the penalties for petty theft are extremely severe, not only as a means of defending society, but also as a stern admonition to the unfortunate to know their place, stick to their caste, and behave themselves, joyfully resigned to go on dying of hunger and misery down through the centuries for ever and ever … Until today, however, petty thieves enjoyed one advantage in the Republic, they were denied the honor of bearing patriotic arms. But that's all over now, tomorrow I, a thief, will resume my place in the army … Such are the orders … It has been decided in high places to forgive and forget what they call my momentary madness, and this, listen carefully, in consideration of what they call the honor of my family. What solicitude! I ask you, comrade, is it my family that's going to serve as a strainer and sorting house for mixed French and German bullets? … It'll just be me, won't it? And when I'm dead, is the honor of my family going to bring me back to life? … I can see how it will be with my family when these warlike scenes have passed … as everything passes … I can see my family on fine Sundays … joyfully gamboling on the lawns of a new summer … while three feet under papa, that's me, dripping with worms and infinitely more disgusting than ten pounds of turds on the Fourteenth of July, will be rotting stupendously with all my deluded flesh … Fertilize the fields of the anonymous plowman? that is the true future of the true soldier! Ah, comrade! This world, I assure you, is only a vast device for kidding the world! You are young! Let these minutes of wisdom be as years to you! Listen well, comrade, and don't fail to recognize and understand the tell-tale sign, which glares from all the

murderous hypocrisies of our Society: ‘Compassion with the fate, the condition of the poor …’ I tell you, little man, life’s fall guys, beaten, fleeced to the bone, sweated from time immemorial, I warn you, that when the princes of this world start loving you, it means they’re going to grind you up into battle sausage … That’s the sign … It’s infallible. It starts with affection. Louis XIV, at least, and don’t forget it, didn’t give a hoot in hell about his beloved people. Louis XV ditto. He smeared his asshole with them. True, we didn’t live well in those days, the poor have never lived well, but the kings didn’t flay them with the obstinacy, the persistence you meet with in today’s tyrants. There’s no rest, I tell you, for the little man, except in the contempt of the great, whose only motive for thinking of the common people is self-interest, when it isn’t sadism … It’s the philosophers … another point to look out for while we’re at it … who first started giving the people ideas … when all they’d known up until then was the catechism! They began, so they proclaimed, to educate the people … Ah! What truths they had to reveal! Beautiful! brilliant!

unprecedented truths! And the people were dazzled! That’s it! they said. That’s the stuff!

Let’s go and die for it! The people are always dying to die! That’s the way they are! ‘Long live Diderot!’ they yelled. And ‘Long live Voltaire!’ They, at least, were first-class philosophers. And long live Carnot, too, who was so good at organizing victories!

And long live everybody! Those guys at least don’t let the beloved people molder in ignorance and fetishism! They show the people the roads of Freedom! Emancipation!

Things went fast after that! First teach everybody to read the papers! That’s the way to salvation! Hurry hurry! No more illiterates! We don’t need them anymore! Nothing but citizen-soldiers! Who vote! Who read! And who fight! And who march! And send kisses from the front! In no time the people were good and ripe! The enthusiasm of the liberated has to be good for something, doesn’t it? Danton wasn’t eloquent for the hell of it. With a few phrases, so rousing that we can still hear them today, he had the people mobilized before you could say fiddlesticks! That was when the first battalions of emancipated maniacs marched off! … the first voting, flagmatic suckers that Dumouriez led away to get themselves drilled full of holes in Flanders! As for Dumouriez himself, who had come too late to these new-fangled idealistic pastimes, he discovered that he was more interested in money and deserted. He was our last mercenary. The free-gratis soldier … was something really new … So new that when Goethe arrived in Valmy, Goethe or not, he was flabbergasted. At the sight of those ragged, impassioned cohorts, who had come of their own free will to get themselves disemboweled by the King of Prussia in defense of a patriotic fiction no one had ever heard of, Goethe realized that he still had much to learn. This day,’ he declaimed grandiloquently as befitted the habits of his genius, ‘marks the beginning of a new era!’ He could say that again! The system proved successful … pretty soon they were mass-producing heroes, and in the end, the system was so well perfected that they cost practically nothing. Everyone was delighted. Bismarck, the two Napoleons, Barrès, Elsa the Horsewoman. The religion of the flag promptly replaced the cult of heaven, an old cloud which had already been deflated by the Reformation and reduced to a network of episcopal money boxes. In olden times the fanatical fashion was: ‘Long live Jesus! Burn the heretics!’ … But heretics, after all, were few and voluntary … Whereas today vast hordes of men are fired with aim and purpose by cries of: ‘Hang the limp turnips! The juiceless lemons! The innocent readers! By the millions, eyes right!’ If anybody doesn’t want to fight or murder, grab ‘em, tear ‘em to pieces! Kill them in thirteen juicy ways. For a starter, to teach them how to live, rip their guts out of their bodies, their eyes out of their sockets, and the years out of their filthy slobbering lives! Let whole legions of them perish, turn into smidgens, bleed, smolder in acid?and all that to make the Patrie more beloved, more fair, and more joyful! And if in their midst there are any foul creatures who refuse to understand these sublime truths, they can just go and bury themselves right with the others, no, not quite, their place will be at the far end of the cemetery, under the shameful epitaphs of cowards without an ideal, for those contemptible slugs will have forfeited the glorious right to a small patch of the shadow of the municipal monument erected by the lowest bidder in the central avenue to commemorate the reputable dead, and also the right to hear so much as a distant echo of the Minister’s speech next Sunday, when he comes around to urinate at the Prefecture and sound off over the graves after lunch …”

But from the end of the garden someone was calling Princhard. The head physician had sent his orderly to get him on the double.

“Coming,” Princhard cried. He had barely time enough to hand me the draft of the speech he had been trying out on me. A ham if there ever was one.

I never saw Princhard again. He had the same trouble as all intellectuals?he was ineffectual. He knew too many things, and they confused him. He needed all sorts of gimmicks to steam him up, help him make up his mind.

It’s been a long time … since that night when he went away. But I remember it well. Suddenly the houses at

the end of our park stood out sharply, as things do before the night takes hold of them. The trees grew larger in the twilight and shot up to the sky to meet the night.

I never made any attempt to get in touch with Princhard, to find out if he had really “disappeared,” as they kept saying. But it’s best if he disappeared.

6

While the war was still on, the seeds of our hateful peace were being sown. A hysterical bitch, you could see what she'd be like just by watching her cavorting in the dance hall of the Olympia. In that long cellar room, you could see her squinting out of a hundred mirrors, stamping her feet in the dust and despair to the music of a Negro-JudeoSaxon band. Britishers and Blacks, Levantines and Russians were everywhere, smoking and bellowing, military melancholies lined up on the red plush sofas. Those uniforms that people are beginning to find it hard to remember were the seeds of the present day, of something that is still growing and that won't become total shit for a while yet, but will in the long run.

Every week, after spending a few hours at the Olympia, warming up our desires, a few of us would go calling on our friend Madame Herote, who kept a lingerie, glove, and bookshop in the Impasse des Bérésinas behind the Folies Bergère, a covered passage that isn't there anymore, where little girls brought little dogs on leashes to do their business. We went there to grope for our happiness, which all the world was threatening with the utmost ferocity. We were ashamed of wanting what we wanted, but something had to be done about it all the same. Love is harder to give up than life. In this world we spend our time killing or adoring, or both together. "I hate you! I adore you!" We keep going, we fuel and refuel, we pass on our life to a biped of the next century, with frenzy, at any cost, as if it were the greatest of pleasures to perpetuate ourselves, as if, when all's said and done, it would make us immortal. One way or another, kissing is as indispensable as scratching. My mental state had improved, but my military situation was still uncertain. I had leave to go out now and then. Anyway, the name of our lingerie lady was Madame Herote. Her forehead was low and so narrow that at first you felt uneasy in her presence, but her lips were so smiling and voluptuous that after a while you didn't see how you could get away from her. Under a surface of staggering volubility and unforgettable ardor, she concealed a set of simple, rapacious, and piously mercantile aims.

In a few months she piled up a fortune, thanks to the Allies and thanks above all to her uterus. Her ovaries had been removed; to put it plainly, she had been operated for salpingitis the year before. That liberating castration had made her fortune. Gonorrhea in a woman can be providential. A woman who spends her time worrying about pregnancy is a virtual cripple, she'll never go very far.

Old men and young men thought, and so did I, that love was easily and cheaply available in the backrooms of certain lingerie-bookshops. That was still true some twenty years ago, but today a lot of things aren't done anymore, especially some of the most agreeable. Every month Anglo-Saxon puritanism is drying us up a little more, it has already reduced those impromptu backroom carousals to practically nothing. Now marriage and respectability are the thing.

In those days, for the last time, there was still freedom to fuck standing up and cheap, and Madame Herote put it to good use. One Sunday an auction room appraiser with time on his hands sighted her shop and went in; he's still there. He was slightly gaga, and gaga he remained, but nothing more. Their happiness aroused no interest in the neighborhood. In the shadow of the newspapers with their delirious appeals for ultimate patriotic sacrifices, life went on, strictly rationed, larded with precautions, and more trickily resourceful than ever before, Those are the heads and tails, the light and shade, of the same coin. Madame Herote's appraiser invested money in Holland for his better-informed friends, and for Madame Herote as well once they became intimate. Her stock of neckties and brassieres and almost-chemises attracted customers of both sexes and brought them back time and time again.

Any number of national and international encounters took place in the pink shadow of those curtains, amid the incessant loquacity of Madame Herote, whose substantial, talkative, and overwhelmingly perfumed person would have put the most bilious of males in a lecherous mood. Far from losing her head in these miscellaneous gatherings, Madame Herote turned them to her advantage, first in terms of money, since she levied a tithe on all sentimental transactions, but also through her enjoyment of all the lovemaking that went on around her. She took pleasure in bringing couples together and as much or more in breaking them up by means of tale-telling, insinuations, and out and out treachery. She never wearied of fomenting happiness and tragedy. She stoked the life of the passions, and her business prospered.

Proust, who was half ghost, immersed himself with extraordinary tenacity in the infinitely watery futility of the rites and procedures that entwine the members of high society, those denizens of the void, those phantoms of desire, those irresolute daisy-chainers still waiting for their Watteau, those listless seekers after implausible Cythereas. Whereas Madame Herote, with her sturdy popular origins, was firmly fastened to the earth by her crude, stupid, and very specific appetites.

Maybe, if people are so wicked, it's only because they suffer, but years can elapse between the time when they stop suffering and the time when their characters take a turn for the better. Madame Herote's impressive

material and amatory success hadn't had time yet to soften her rapacious instincts.

She was no more hateful than most of the shopkeeping ladies about, but she took so much trouble convincing people of the contrary that one doesn't tend to forget her. Her shop was more than a meeting place, it was a kind of secret gateway to a world of wealth and luxury, in which, much as I had wanted to, I had never set foot until then, and from which I was promptly and embarrassingly ejected after one furtive incursion, my first and last. In Paris the rich live together. Their neighborhoods adjoin and coalesce, so as to form a wedge of urban cake, the tip of which touches the Louvre and the rounded outer edge is bounded by the trees between the Pont d'Auteuil and the Porte des Ternes. That's the good part of the city. All the rest is shit and misery.

At first glance the rich neighborhoods don't look so very different from the rest of the city, except that the streets are a little cleaner. But if you want to go deeper in your excursion, to get inside the people who live there, you'll have to rely on chance or on intimate connections.

Madame Herote's shop could give you some little access to this preserve, through the Argentines who came in from the privileged neighborhoods to buy shirts and underwear and flirt with the unusual selection of ambitious, theatrical, musical, and well-built young friends whom Madame Herote deliberately gathered around her.

I, who, as they say, had nothing to offer but my youth, became too much interested in one of them. Little Musyne they called her in her crowd.

In the Passage des Bérésinas, the shopkeepers all knew one another, it was like a provincial village wedged for years between two Paris streets, in other words, everybody slandered and spied on everybody else as much as was humanly and deliriously possible. What the shopkeepers mostly talked and complained about before the war was the petty, desperately thrifty life they all led. Among other sordid hardships, the chronic complaint of those shopkeepers was being obliged by the prevailing gloom to light their gas at four in the afternoon because of their showcases. But inside the shops, the selfsame twilight made for an atmosphere conducive to off-color suggestions.

Nevertheless, a good many of the shops were being ruined by the war, while Madame Herote's, thanks to the young Argentines, to officers with per diem allowances, and to the advice of her friend the appraiser, enjoyed a prosperity on which, as you can easily imagine, the whole neighborhood commented in the most vitriolic terms. It was just about then, for instance, that the famous pastry shop at 112 lost its best customers. The latest mobilization was to blame. So many horses had been requisitioned that the ladies with the long gloves, who had dropped in regularly at teatime, would have been obliged to walk. They stopped coming, and they never came back. Sambanet, the music binder, was suddenly unable to resist the urge, which had long tormented him, to sodomize a soldier. A bungled attempt one night did him irreparable harm with certain patriotic gentlemen, who accused him forthwith of being a spy. He was obliged to close up shop.

Then Mademoiselle Hermance, at No. 26, who had hitherto specialized in the sale of a certain mentionable or unmentionable item made of rubber, would have been doing all right under the prevailing circumstances, if she hadn't found it so unconscionably difficult to procure her "merry widows," which were made in Germany.

In short, it was only Madame Herote who, on the threshold of a new era of lighter-than-air democratic lingerie, found an easy way to prosperity.

Plenty of anonymous letters were written from shop to shop, and they didn't mince words. Madame Herote preferred for her entertainment to write to highly placed persons, so demonstrating that a virulent ambition was the cornerstone of her character. She wrote several to the Premier, for instance, just to convince him that he was a cuckold, and some to Marshal Pétain in English, with the help of a dictionary, to drive him crazy. But what's an anonymous letter? Water off a duck's back. Every day Madame Herote received a whole packet of these unsigned letters, which didn't smell good, I assure you. She'd be pensive, upset, for about ten minutes, but then she'd recover her composure, she didn't care how or by what means, but she got it back good and solid, for there was no place for doubt in her inner life, and still less for truth.

Among her customers and protégées, there were several young ladies from the entertainment world? actresses and musicians? who came with more debts than clothes. Madame Herote gave them advice, and it helped them no end. One of them was Musyne, the most attractive of the lot for my money. Musyne was a musician, she played the violin, a very shrewd little angel, as I was soon to learn. Implacable in her determination to succeed here on earth and not in heaven, she was doing all right at the time of our first meeting in an adorable, exceedingly Parisian, and now completely forgotten little act at the Variétés.

She'd appear with her violin in a kind of impromptu prologue in melody and verse. A charming, complicated genre.

Smitten as I was, my days became a frenzy, dashing from the hospital to the back door of her theater. I was seldom alone in waiting for her. The ground forces would snatch her away in a twinkling, the flyers had an even easier time of it, but undoubtedly the seduction prize went to the Argentines. As more and more soldiers swarmed to the colors, their coldstorage meat business assumed the proportions of a tidal wave. Little Musyne made a good thing of those profiteering days; she knew what she was doing, since then the Argentines have gone out of existence.

I didn't understand. I was being hornswoggled by everything and everybody, women, money, and ideas. I was a sucker, and I didn't like it. I still run into Musyne now and then, every two years or so she crosses my path, as people one has known well tend to. Two years is the time it takes to perceive at one glance, a glance as sure as instinct, the ugliness that can come over a face, even one that was delicious in its day.

For a moment you hesitate, then you accept the face as it has become, with its repugnant cumulative disharmony. What can you do but acquiesce in this slow, painstaking caricature which two years have etched, but accept the passage of time, that portrait of ourselves. Then we can say that we've really recognized each other (like some foreign banknote that one hesitates to accept at first sight), that we hadn't taken a wrong turn, that each on his own we'd traveled the right road, the inevitable road to decay, for another two years. That's all there is to it.

When she ran into me like that, I frightened her so with my big head it looked as if she wanted to run away, to avoid me, to turn aside, anything … Obviously, as far as she was concerned, I stank of a whole past. But I've known her age for too long, and try as she will she absolutely can't escape me. She stands there, evidently put off by my existence, as if I were a monster. She, so sensitive, feels obliged to ask me crude, stupid questions, the kind that a housemaid caught stealing sugar might ask. All women are domestics at heart. But possibly she imagines this revulsion more than she feels it; that's the only consolation I can find. Maybe I'm not really repulsive, but only give her the illusion that I am. Maybe I'm an artist in that line. After all, why wouldn't there be an art of ugliness as well as beauty?

Maybe it's a gift that needs to be cultivated.

For a long time I thought little Musyne was stupid, but that was only because I was vain and she had run out on me. Before the war, you know, we were all a lot more ignorant and conceited than today. A little nobody like me was much more likely to take rubbish for rainbows than he would be today. I thought being in love with somebody as adorable as Musyne would give me every kind of strength and virtue, especially the courage I lacked, just because she was so pretty and such a gifted musician. Love is like liquor, the drunker and more impotent you are, the stronger and smarter you think yourself and the surer you are of your rights.

Dozens of Madame Herote's cousins had made the supreme sacrifice, so she never left her passage except in deep mourning. To tell the truth, she seldom went out, because the appraiser was pretty jealous. We gathered in the dining room behind the shop, which with the coming of prosperity had taken on the appearance of a little salon. There we would chat and pass the time in a pleasant, well-behaved kind of way under the gas jet. Little Musyne at the piano would charm us with classical pieces, only classical music was thought fitting in those sorrowful times. We'd sit there for whole afternoons, side by side, the appraiser in the middle, musing over our secrets, our fears and hopes.

Madame Herote's maid, whom she had hired only a short time before, was always bursting with impatience to find out when this one would finally make up his mind to marry that one. In her village free love was unheard of. All those Argentines and officers and slippery-fingered customers filled her with an almost animal terror. More and more often Musyne was monopolized by the South American customers. What with waiting for my angel, I soon got to know the caballeros' kitchens and servants very well. Naturally the valets took me for a pimp. In the end everybody took me for a pimp, including Musyne and, I'm pretty sure, the regulars at Madame Herote's shop. There was nothing I could do about it. Sooner or later people are bound to classify you as something. I wangled another two months' convalescent leave, and there was even some talk of a medical discharge. Musyne and I decided to go and live together in Billancourt. This was actually a subterfuge to ditch me, because she took advantage of its being so far away to come home less and less frequently. She was always finding some pretext for spending the night in Paris.

The nights in Billancourt were soft and sweet, enlivened now and then by those childish airplane or zeppelin alarms which provided the civilian population with thrills and selfjustification. While waiting for Musyne, I'd walk as far as the Pont de Grenelle, where the darkness rises from the river to the overhead Métro tracks, with their strings of lights traversing the darkness and their enormous metallic hulks, hurling themselves like

thunder at the flanks of the big buildings on the Quai de Passy.

There are neighborhoods like that in big cities, so stupidly ugly that you're almost always alone there.

In the end Musyne was showing up at our so-called home only once a week. More and more often she'd spend the evening accompanying some lady singer at the house of some Argentine. She could have made a living playing at the movies, and it would have been a lot easier for me to call for her, but the Argentines were lively and paid well, while the movie houses were dismal and the pay was wretched. Life is made up of those little preferences. To complete my misery, the Theater of the Armies came along. In no time Musyne got to know dozens of people at the Ministry. More and more often she went off to entertain our soldier boys at the front and stayed away for weeks on end, serving up sonatas and adagios to the troops. The front seats in the orchestra would be occupied by top brass, well placed to admire her legs, while the soldiers, seated on wooden stands behind their commanders, had to make do with melodious echoes. After the performance, of course, she would spend exceedingly complicated nights in the hotels of the army area. One day she came home as happy as a lark, brandishing a certificate of heroism, signed if you please by one of our glorious generals. With that diploma she became a real success.

It made her ever so popular with the Argentine colony. They feted her, they were mad about my Musyne, oh, what an adorable little front-line violinist! So rosy-cheeked and curly-headed, and a heroine to boot. Those Argentines knew which side their bread was buttered on, their admiration for our glorious generals knew no bounds, and when my Musyne came back to them with her authentic document, her pretty phiz, and her nimble, heroic little fingers, each tried to love her more than the next, they tried to outbid each other, so to speak. The poetry of heroism holds an irresistible appeal for people who aren't involved in a war, especially when they're making piles of money out of one. It's only natural.

Ah, jaunty heroism! Strong men have swooned away! The shipbuilders of Rio offered their names and their shares to the adorable young thing who feminized the warlike valor of the French so charmingly for their benefit. Musyne, I have to admit, had managed to outfit herself with a delightful little repertory of war adventures, they were wonderfully becoming, like a jaunty little cap. Sometimes she amazed me with her skillful touch, and listening to her I had to own that when it came to tall stories I was a clumsy faker compared to her. She had a gift for locating her fantasies in a dramatic faraway setting that gave everything a lasting glow. It often struck me that when we combatants spun yarns they tended to be crudely chronometric and precise. Her medium was eternity. Claude Lorrain was right in saying that the foreground of a picture is always repugnant and that the interest of an artwork must be seen in the distance, in that unfathomable realm which is the refuge of lies, of those dreams caught in the act, which are the only thing men love. The woman who can turn our despicable nature to account has no difficulty in becoming our darling, our indispensable and supreme hope. We expect her to preserve our illusory raison d'ętre, but on the other hand she can make a very good living while performing this magic function. Instinctively, Musyne did just that. The Argentines lived in the Ternes area and on the fringes of the Bois, in small private houses, resplendent and well fenced-in, which were kept so delightfully warm in that wintry weather that when you came in from the street your thoughts suddenly took an optimistic turn, you couldn't help it.

In my jittery despair, I had taken to waiting for Musyne in the butler's pantry as often as possible, a stupid thing to do. Sometimes I waited until morning, I was sleepy, but jealousy kept me awake, and so did the quantities of white wine the servants poured out for me. I seldom saw the Argentine masters of the house, I heard their songs and their blustering Spanish and the piano which never stopped but was usually being played by other hands than those of my Musyne. What, meanwhile, was she doing with her hands, the slut?

When she saw me at the door in the morning, she made a face. I was still as natural as an animal in those days. I was like a dog with a bone, I wouldn't let go. People waste a large part of their youth in stupid mistakes. It was obvious that my darling was going to leave me, flat and soon. I hadn't found out yet that mankind consists of two very different races, the rich and the poor. It took me … and plenty of other people … twenty years and the war to learn to stick to my class and ask the price of things before touching them, let alone setting my heart on them.

So as I warmed myself in the pantry with the servants, I was unaware that the people dancing over my head were Argentine gods, they could have been German, French, or Chinese, that didn't mean a thing, the point was that they were gods, rich people, that's what I should have realized. Them upstairs with Musyne, me downstairs with nothing. Musyne was thinking seriously of her future, and naturally she preferred to do that kind of thinking with a god. I, too, was thinking of my future, but in a kind of delirium, because my constant companion was a muted fear of being killed in tbe war or of starving when peace came. I had a death sentence hanging over me, and I was in love. A nightmare, to put it mildly. Not far away, less than seventy miles, millions of brave, well-armed, well-trained men were waiting to settle my hash, and plenty of Frenchmen were waiting, too, to pump me full of lead if I declined to be cut into bleeding ribbons by the

opposite side. A poor man in this world can be done to death in two main ways, by the absolute indifference of his fellows in peacetime or by their homicidal mania when there's a war. When other people start thinking about you, it's to figure out how to torture you, that and nothing else. The bastards want to see you bleeding, otherwise they're not interested!

Princhard was dead right. In the shadow of the slaughterhouse, you don't speculate very much about your future, you think about loving in the days you have left, because there's no other way of forgetting your body that's about to be skinned alive. Since Musyne was slipping away from me, I took myself for an idealist, which is the name we give to our little instincts clothed in high-sounding words. My leave was drawing to an end. The newspapers were summoning every conceivable combatant to the colors, first of all, it goes without saying, the ones without connections. An official order had gone out that no one should think of anything but winning the war.

Musyne, like Lola, was extremely eager to have me get back to the front on the double and stay there, and since I seemed to be dragging my feet, she decided to expedite matters, which was unusual for her.

One night when for a change we went home to Billancourt together, the fire brigade came by blowing bugles, and everybody in our house went scrambling down to the cellar in honor of some zeppelin.

Those petty panics, when a whole neighborhood in pajamas would pick up candles and vanish, cackling and clucking, into the bowels of the earth to escape a peril that was almost entirely imaginary, showed up the terrifying futility of those people, who behaved by turns like frightened hens and sheepish sheep. These preposterous inconsistencies ought to disgust the most patient, the most tenacious of sociophiles for good and all. At the first blast of the bugle, Musyne forgot every bit of the heroism for which she had been cited at the Theater of the Armies. She insisted on rushing into some hole and dragging me with her, into the Métro, the sewers, anywhere, as long as it was sheltered and deep enough under ground! After a while the sight of all those people, our fellow tenants, fat and thin, jovial and majestic, descending four by four, into the salutary pit, armed even me with indifference. Brave or cowardly? there's not much difference. A poltroon in one situation, a hero in another? it's the same man, and he doesn't think any more in one aspect than in the other. Everything unrelated to making money is infinitely beyond him. The question of life and death escapes him completely. Even on the subject of his own death his cogitations are feeble and ass-backward. He understands money and theatricals, nothing else.

Musyne whined when I resisted. Other tenants urged us to come along, and in the end I gave in. There were several cellar compartments to choose from, and various suggestions were made. The majority finally favored the butcher's storage cellar, it was deeper down, so they said, than any of the others. On the stairs I caught a whiff of an acrid odor that I knew only too well and which I absolutely couldn't bear.

"Musyne," I said, "are you really going down *there?* With all that meat hanging on hooks?" The question surprised her. "Why not?"

"Well," I said, "I have certain memories. I'd rather go back upstairs …"

"You mean you're leaving me?"

"You'll join me as soon as it's over."

"But it may go on a long time …"

"I'd rather wait for you upstairs," I said. "I don't like meat, and it'll be over soon." During the alert, sheltered in their dens, the tenants exchanged sprightly comments. Some ladies in kimonos, the last to arrive, swept with elegance and grace into that odoriferous chasm, where the butcher and his wife bade them welcome, at the same time apologizing for the artificial cold, indispensable for the conservation of their merchandise. Musyne vanished with the rest. I waited in our apartment, a night, a whole day, a year … She never came back to me.

From that time on I became harder and harder to please. I had only two thoughts in my head: to save my skin and go to America. But getting away from the war was a first step which kept me busy and breathless for months and months.

The patriots kept clamoring: "Guns! Men! Ammunition!" They never seemed to get tired. It looked as if they wouldn't be able to sleep until poor Belgium and innocent little Alsace were wrested from the German yoke. It was an obsession which, so we were told, prevented the best of our fellow citizens from breathing, eating, or copulating. But it didn't seem to prevent the survivors from swinging business deals. Morale was doing all right on the home front.

There was every reason to ship us back to our regiments in a hurry. But when the medics looked me over, they still found me subnormal, barely good enough to be sent to another hospital, this one for the bones and nervous system. One morning six of us, three artillerymen and three dragoons, all of us sick and wounded, left the depot in quest of this institution where shattered courage, demolished reflexes, and broken arms were repaired. First, like all wounded soldiers at the time, we stopped for a checkup at the Val-de-Grâce,

that noble pot-bellied citadel, with its beard of trees. The corridors smelled like a thirdclass railway carriage? a smell that's gone today, forever no doubt, compounded of feet, straw, and oil lamps. We didn't hang fire at the Val, they'd barely caught sight of us when two administrative, bedandruffed, and overworked officers chewed us out good and proper, threatened us with a court-martial, and projected us via other administrators into the street. They had no room for us, so they said, and directed us, very vaguely, to a bastion situated somewhere in the outskirts.

From bistrot to bastion, from absinthe to café crème, the six of us wandered about, at the mercy of every misdirector, in search of this new refuge which seemed to specialize in the treatment of incompetent heroes like us.

Only one of us had even the most rudimentary personal property, and that fitted nicely into a little tin box marked "Pernot Biscuits," a well-known brand at the time, though I never hear it mentioned anymore. In that box our comrade kept a few cigarettes and a toothbrush. Come to think of it, we used to kid him about the care he took of his teeth, which was most unusual at the time. "Homosexual" we used to call him'.

Finally, in the middle of the night, we approached the outworks, swollen with darkness of the Bicętre bastion. No. 43 it was called. That was the place.

It had just been renovated to serve as a home for elderly cripples. They hadn't even finished laying out the garden.

When we got there, there wasn't a living soul in the military section, only the concierge. The rain was coming down in buckets. The concierge was terrified when she heard us, but we made her laugh by touching her in the right place. "I thought it was the Germans," she said.

"They're miles away," we told her. "Where are you wounded?" she asked with concern. "All over, but not in the cock!" said one of the artillerymen. That, I don't mind telling you, was real wit, just the kind the concierge liked.

Later on some old men on welfare were lodged in that bastion with us. New buildings with miles and miles of window glass had been thrown up for them in a hurry, and there they were kept like insects until the end of the war. On the surrounding hills a rash of skimpy housing lots vied for possession of the seas of mud inadequately contained by rows of precarious shacks, in the shadow of which one would occasionally see a head of lettuce and three radishes, of which, it is hard to say why, the nauseated slugs were making the houseowner a present.

Our hospital was clean. You have to hurry to see that kind of thing, move in at the beginning, the first few weeks, because maintenance isn't a French virtue, we have no taste for it, in fact, we're downright disgusting in that respect. We flopped on six metal beds, at random and by moonlight, the building was so new the electricity hadn't been put in yet. Early next morning the doctor came and introduced himself, he seemed delighted to see us and exuded cordiality. He had reasons for being pleased, he'd just been promoted to major, and in addition he had the most beautiful eyes you ever saw, supernatural velvet, he made use of them to flutter the hearts of several volunteer nurses, who surrounded him with attentions and sympathetic mimicry and feasted on every word and move of their dear doctor. At the very first meeting he took our morale in hand and told us as much. Taking one of us by the shoulders and shaking him with paternal familiarity, he explained the regulations in a comforting tone and indicated the quickest and surest way of getting ourselves sent back to the front to be lambasted some more.

Wherever they came from, no two ways about it, that was their only thought. It seemed to give them a kick. It was the new vice. "France, my friends," he proclaimed, "has put her trust in you. France is a woman. She is counting on your heroism! She has been a victim of the most cowardly, the most abominable aggression. She has a right to expect her sons to avenge her to the hilt! To restore, even at the cost of the extreme sacrifice, every square inch of her territory! All of us here in the hospital, my friends, will do our duty, and we expect you to do yours! Our science is at your disposal! It is yours! All its resources will be devoted to curing you! Help us with your good will! I know we can count on your good will! We hope, we trust, that each one of you will soon resume his place side by side with his dear comrades in the trenches! Your sacred place! Defending your beloved soil! Vive la France! Forward to battle!" He knew how to talk to soldiers.

We were all standing at attention at the foot of our beds. Behind him a brunette, one of his group of pretty nurses, was having a hard time controlling her feelings, which were made visible by three or four tears. The other nurses, her friends, tried to comfort her: “Don’t worry, sweetie, he’ll be back … I’m sure he will!”

Her cousin, a plumpish blonde, was consoling her the most. As she passed us, holding her up with both arms, the plump one told me this weakness had overcome her pretty cousin because her fiance had just gone off to the navy. Our impassioned medical authority tried to soothe the tragic and beautiful emotion aroused by his short, vibrant speech. He was embarrassed and grieved. The apprehension he had awakened in this profound and noble heart, all sensibility and tenderness, was too painful. “If we had only known, Doctor,” the blonde cousin whispered, “we’d have warned you … They love each other so dearly, you can’t imagine!” The group of nurses and the Master went their way. Chattering and swishing they receded down the corridor. They had finished with us.

I tried to recollect, and to fathom the meaning of, the speech the man with the beautiful eyes had just made, but far from depressing me, when I thought it over, his words struck me as just what was needed to disgust me with the whole idea of dying. My comrades were of the same opinion, but they did not, like me, see a kind of challenge or insult in them. They made no attempt to understand what was going on around us; all they saw, and that unclearly, was that the usual delirium of the world had so increased in the last few months that there was nothing stable left for a man to build his existence on. Here in the hospital, just as in the Flanders night, death stalked us. Here, to be sure, it threatened from a distance, but just as implacably, once the Administration set it in pursuit of your trembling carcass.

Here, it was true, they didn’t bawl us out, in fact they spoke gently, and they never talked about death, but our death sentence showed up distinctly in the corner of every paper they asked us to sign and in all the precautions they surrounded us with … those tags around our necks and wrists … whenever they let us out for a few hours. And all the advice they gave us! … We felt counted, watched, serial-numbered, enrolled in the vast multitude that would soon be leaving for the front. So naturally all the civilian and medical personnel around us seemed more cheerful than we were. The nurses, the bitches, weren’t in the same boat, their only thought was to go on living, to live longer and longer, to live and love, to stroll in the park and to copulate thousands and thousands of times. Every one of those angelic creatures had a plan all worked out in her perineum, like a convict, a little plan for love later on, when all of us soldier boys should have perished in God knows what mud and God knows how!

Then they would sigh with a very special commemorative tenderness that would make them more attractive than ever; interspersed with heartbreaking silences, they would evoke the tragic days of the war, the ghosts … “Do you remember little Bardamu?” they would say in the gathering dusk, thinking of me, the lad who had coughed so much and given them such a time to make him stop … “Poor boy, his morale was way down … I wonder what became of him?”

A few poetic regrets, if adroitly placed, are as becoming to a woman as gossamer hair in the moonlight.

What I couldn’t help hearing under their spoken words and expressions of sympathy was this: “Nice little soldier boy, you’re going to die … You’re going to die … This is war … Everyone has his own life … his role … his death … We seem to share your distress … But no one can share anyone else’s death … A person sound in body and soul should take everything that happens as entertainment, neither more nor less, and we are wholesome young women, beautiful, respected, healthy, and well bred … For us the automatism of biology transforms the whole world into a joyous spectacle, into pure joy! Our health demands it! … We can’t afford the ugly dissipations of sorrow … We need stimulants and more stimulants … You’ll soon be forgotten, dear little soldier boys … Be nice, die quickly … and let’s hope the war will be over soon, so we can marry one of your charming officers … preferably one with dark hair … And long live the Patrie that Papa’s always talking about! … How wonderful love must be when Johnny comes marching home! … Our little husband will be decorated! … cited for bravery … You can shine his lovely boots on our happy wedding day if you like … if you’re still in existence, soldier boy … Won’t you be happy about our happiness, soldier boy? …”

Every morning we saw our doctor, time and again we saw him surrounded by his nurses. He was a scientific light, we were told, The old men from the charity hospital next door would come jerking past our rooms, making useless, disjointed leaps. They’d go from room to room, spitting out gossip between their decayed teeth, purveying scraps of malignant, worn-out slander. Cloistered in their official misery as in an oozing dungeon, those aged workers ruminated the layer of shit that long years of servitude deposit on men’s souls. Impotent hatreds grown rancid in the pissy idleness of dormitories. They employed their last quavering energies in hurting each other a little more, in destroying what little pleasure and life they had left.

Their last remaining pleasure! Their shriveled carcasses contained not one solitary atom that was not absolutely vicious!

As soon as it was settled that we soldiers were going to share the relative comfort of the bastion with those old men, they began to detest us in unison, but that didn't stop them from begging for the crumbs of tobacco on our window sills and the bits of stale bread that had fallen under our benches. At mealtimes they pressed their parchment-skinned faces against the windows of our mess hall. Over their crinkled rheumy noses, they peered in at us like covetous rats. One of those invalids seemed smarter and wickeder than the rest, he'd come and entertain us with the songs of his day, Pere Birouette he was called. He'd do anything we asked provided we gave him tobacco, anything except walk past the hospital morgue, which incidentally was never idle. One of our jokes was to make him go that way, while supposedly taking him for a little stroll. "Won't you come in?" we'd say when we got to the door. He'd run away, griping for all he was worth, so fast and so far we wouldn't see him again for at least two days. Pere Birouette had caught a glimpse of death. Professor Bestombes, our medical major with the beautiful eyes, had installed a complicated assortment of gleaming electrical contraptions which periodically pumped us full of shocks. He claimed they had a tonic effect, and we had to put up with them on pain of banishment. It seems that Bestombes was very rich; he must have been to be able to buy all those expensive electrocution machines. He could afford to throw money around because his father-in-law, a political bigwig, had done some heavy finagling while purchasing land for the government.

Naturally the doctor exploited his advantages. Crime and punishment, it all adds up. We took him as he was, and we didn't hate him. He examined our nervous systems with meticulous care and questioned us in a tone of polite familiarity. This sedulously cultivated good nature enchanted the nurses in his section, who all came of excellent families. Every morning these cuties looked forward to his displays of affability, which were just so yummy. In short, we were all actors in a play?he, Bestombes, had chosen the role of a benevolent, profoundly human and humane scientist. We pulled together, that was the essential.

In this new hospital I shared a room with Sergeant Branledore, a re-enlisted man. He was an old hospital hand. He'd been dragging his perforated intestines around for months and had been in four different hospitals.

He had learned in the process how to attract and to hold the active sympathy of the nurses. He vomited, pissed, and shat blood with astonishing frequency; he also had a lot of trouble breathing, but none of that would have sufficed to win him the special good graces of the nurses, who had seen worse. So between two choking fits, if a doctor or nurse was passing, Branledore would sing out: "Victory! Victory! Victory will be ours!" Or he'd murmur those same words with one corner or the whole of his lungs, as the circumstances required. Thus attuned to the ardently aggressive literature of the day by a well-calculated bit of histrionics, he enjoyed the highest moral standing. That man knew his stuff. Since all the world was a stage, acting was the thing. Branledore knew what he was doing. And indeed nothing looks more idiotic, nothing is more irritating than a sluggish spectator who turns up on stage by mistake. When you're up there, you've got to join in, come to life, act a part, take the plunge or clear out. Especially the women demanded a show, the bitches had no use at all for clumsy amateurs. Unquestionably war went straight to their ovaries, they demanded heroes, and if you weren't a hero you had to pretend to be one or be prepared for the most ignominious fate.

After a week in this new hospital we realized that we would absolutely have to change our image, and thanks to Branledore (a lace salesman in civilian life) the selfsame men, who on our arrival had been terror-stricken, shunning the light, haunted by disgraceful memories of slaughterhouses, metamorphosed ourselves into an incredible gang of swashbucklers, determined to conquer or die, and, take my word for it, armed with derringdo and the most outrageous language. Our speech had indeed become vigorous and so obscene that the ladies sometimes blushed, but they never complained because it is generally agreed that a soldier is as brave as he is wild and cruder than there is any need to be, so much so that his bravery can be measured by the crudeness of his language.

At first, though we copied Branledore to the best of our ability, our patriotic act wasn't quite right, it wasn't really convincing. It took a good week, two in fact, of intensive rehearsing before we had fully caught on.

As soon as that scientific luminary, our Professor Major Doctor Bestombes, noticed the striking improvement in our moral attitudes, he decided to encourage us by admitting a few visitors, our parents to begin with.

To judge by stories I had heard, certain soldiers, really gifted types, experienced a kind of intoxication, you might even speak of an exotic thrill, in combat. Whenever I tried to imagine this particular brand of pleasure, just trying laid me low for at least a week, I felt so incapable of killing anyone that I thought I might just as well give it up right away and abandon the whole idea. Not that I lacked experience, they'd done everything possible to inculcate a taste for killing, but I simply had no talent in that direction. Maybe my initiation should have been more gradual.

One day I decided to tell Professor Bestombes how hard I was finding it, body and soul, to become as brave as I should have liked to be and as the undoubtedly sublime circumstances required. I was uneasy, afraid he would think I was being insolent and talking out of turn. Not at all! The great man said he was delighted that

I'd come to him and bared my troubled soul so fully and frankly,

"You're better, friend Bardamu!" he concluded. "You're better, that's all there is to it! Yes, Bardamu, I regard your coming to me like this, absolutely of your own free will, as a most encouraging sign of a marked improvement in your mental state … Vandesquin, that modest but infinitely wise observer of moral breakdown in the soldiers of the Empire, summed up his findings, back in 1802, in a memoir that is quite unjustly neglected by students of the present day, but must nevertheless be regarded as a classic. In it he describes, with remarkable insight and precision, the so-called 'confessional crises' met with in moral convalescents, and terms them the most encouraging of all symptoms … Almost a century later our great Dupré established his now celebrated nomenclature of the same symptom and characterized the identical crisis as a 'recollection of memories'; according to the same author, this crisis, if the cure is properly administered, should soon be followed by a massive break-up of anxiety percepts and the definitive liberation of the area of consciousness, this being the second stage in the process of psychic recovery. Elsewhere, employing the bold terminology that was his special gift, Dupré devises the formula

'disencumbering cogitative diarrhea' for this crisis, which is accompanied by intense euphoria, a marked resumption of relational activity, a sudden and striking restoration, among other things, of sleep, which in some cases has been known to go on for days at a time, and lastly, at a more advanced stage, by conspicuous hyperactivity of the genital functions, amounting, sometimes in patients who were previously frigid, to a positive sexual frenzy: 'The patient recovers not by easy stages, but at a gallop.' Such was the magnificently descriptive metaphor by which another of our great French psychiatrists of the last century, Philibert Margeton, characterized this recuperative triumph, this sudden resurgence of normal functions in a patient recovering from the fear syndrome … As for you, Bardamu, I already, at the present moment, regard you as a true convalescent … Would it interest you, Bardamu, since we have arrived at this gratifying conclusion, to know that I shall be reading a paper on the fundamental characteristics of the human mind at the Society for Military Psychology tomorrow? … It is not without its merits, I venture to believe."

"Oh yes, Professor, I take a passionate interest in these questions …"

"Well then, Bardamu, to make a long story short, the thesis I put forward is that before the war man was an unknown

quantity for the psychiatrist and the resources of his psyche an enigma …"

"That is also my humble opinion, Professor …"

"You see, Bardamu, the war, by providing us with such unprecedented means of trying men's nervous systems, has been a miraculous revealer of the human mind … Recent pathological disclosures have given us matter for centuries of meditation and study … Let's face it … Up until now we hardly suspected the richness of man's emotional and spiritual resources! Today, thanks to the war, all that has changed! By a process of breaking and entering, painful to be sure, but decisive, nay providential for science, we have penetrated his innermost depths'. Ever since the first revelations came to my attention, the duty of the modern psychologist and moralist has been clear to me, Bestombes, beyond any possible doubt! Our psychological conceptions are in need of total revision!" I, Bardamu, was of exactly the same opinion.

"Yes indeed, Professor, I am convinced that …"

"Ah, you think so too, Bardamu … You say so yourself! In man, you see, there is a balance between good and evil, between egoism on the one hand and altruism on the other … In elite subjects more altruism than egoism. Am I right? Don't you agree?"

"Exactly, Professor, you've hit the nail on the head …"

"And what, Bardamu, I ask you, what is the highest known concept, the concept best suited to arousing the altruism of the elite subject and compelling it to manifest itself unequivocally?"

"Patriotism, Professor!"

"Ah, you see? The word is yours, not mine. You understand, Bardamu!… Patriotism and glory, which is its corollary and proof!"

"How true!"

"Ah! our soldier boys … at their first baptism of fire they spontaneously cast off all sophisms and subsidiary concepts, in particular the sophism of self-preservation. Instinctively and immediately they merge with our

true raison d'etre, the Patrie. For the attainment of truth, Bardamu, intelligence is not only superfluous, it is in the way. Like all essential truths, the Patrie is a truth of the heart! The common people understand that … and that is where the inept scientist goes wrong …"

"It's beautiful, Professor! Too beautiful! I am reminded of the Ancients!" Bestombes pressed both my hands almost affectionately. And in a fatherly tone he added for my special benefit: "That, Bardamu, is how I mean to treat my patients, electricity for the body, and for the mind massive doses of patriotic ethics, injections as it were of invigorating morality!"

"I understand, Professor!"

I was indeed beginning to understand more and more.

On leaving him I joined my invigorated companions at Mass in the brand-new chapel, I caught sight of Branledore in a corner, demonstrating his moral vigor by giving the concierge's little girl lessons in enthusiasm. He beckoned me to join him, and I did. That afternoon some of our parents came from Paris for the first time since we'd been there, and from then on they came every week.

I had finally written to my mother. She was glad to see me again and whimpered like a bitch whose puppy has been given back to her. She thought she was doing me a lot of good by kissing me, but she was miles behind the bitch, because she believed what they said when they took me away from her. A dog only believes what it can smell. One afternoon my mother and I took a long walk through the streets around the hospital, dawdling down half-finished byways, with lampposts that hadn't been painted yet, between long, oozing house fronts with their windows full of gaudy dangling rags, the shirts of the poor … We listened to the crackling song of the frying pans, a tempest of rancid fat. In the great shapeless desert surrounding the city, the rot in which its false luxury ends, the city shows everyone who wants to look the garbage piles of its enormous posterior. There are factories one avoids when out for a stroll, which emit smells of all sorts, some of them hardly believable. The air roundabout couldn't possibly stink any worse. Nearby a little street carnival molders between two chimneys of unequal height, the wooden horses cost too much for the rickety dribbling children with nosefuls of fingers, who long for them and stand spellbound, sometimes for weeks on end, attracted and repelled by their forlorn rundown look and the music.

What efforts are made to keep the truth away from these places, but it comes back again and again, to grieve for everybody. Drinking is no help, red wine as thick as ink, nothing helps, the sky in those places never changes, it's a vast lake of suburban smoke, shutting them in. Under foot the mud drags you down with fatigue, and the sides of existence are also closed, shut off by hotels and more factories. Even the walls in that section are coffins. With Lola gone for good and Musyne too, I had nobody left. That's why I finally wrote to my mother, just to see somebody. I was only twenty, and all I had was a past. The two of us together, my mother and I, walked through dozens of Sunday streets. She told me little things about her business, what the people around her were saying about the war, that it was sad, "horrible" in fact, but that with plenty of courage we'd all come through in the end, the ones that got killed were an accident, like in the races, if you kept your seat properly you wouldn't fall. To her the war was just one more affliction, she tried not to think about it too much, because it frightened her in a way, it was full of terrifying things she didn't understand. She had no doubt that poor people like her were born to suffer in every way, that that was their role on earth, and that if things had been going so badly of late, the cumulative faults of the poor must have a good deal to do with it … They must have been very naughty, of course they hadn't meant to be, but they were guilty all the same, and giving them a chance to expiate their transgressions by suffering was a great kindness … My mother was an "untouchable."

That resigned, tragic optimism was her only faith and the foundation of her character. The two of us, in the rain, went down streets of vacant lots. The sidewalks in that part of the world sink and evade your step, in winter the branches of the little ash trees at the edge hold the raindrops a long time, a tenuous fairyland trembling in the breeze. Our way back to the hospital led past a number of newly built hotels, some had names, others hadn't even gone to that much trouble. "Rooms by the week" was all they had to say for themselves. The war had suddenly emptied them of all the workers and wage slaves who had lived there. They wouldn't even come back to die. Dying is work, too, but they'd do it somewhere else.

My mother was tearful as she took me back to the hospital. She accepted the accident of my death, and not content to acquiesce, she wondered if I was as resigned to it as she was. She believed in fate as implicitly as she did in the beautiful standard meter at the Conservatoire des Arts et Métiers, which she had always spoken of with respect, because she had learned in her youth that the one she used in her notions shop was a scrupulous copy of that superb official original.

Between the housing lots in that degraded countryside there were still a few fields and gardens here and there

and, attached to those scraps of land, a few aged peasants wedged in between the new buildings. When there was time left before I had to be back, my mother and I went to watch them, those comical peasants obstinately poking iron into the earth, that soft grainy substance, where the dead are laid to rot but which gives us our bread all the same. “The ground must be terribly hard,” my mother said every time she saw them. She was puzzled. You see, she only understood miseries that resembled her own, city miseries, and she tried to figure out what the country kind could be like. That was the only curiosity I ever saw in my mother. It was all the diversion she needed for a Sunday, and she took it back to the city with her.

I never heard from Lola, or from Musyne either. Those sluts were on the good side of the situation, from which we, the flesh earmarked for sacrifice, were barred by smiling but implacable orders. Twice I’d been sent back to the places where the hostages were coralled. My future was all settled.

As I’ve told you, Branledore, my neighbor at the hospital, enjoyed permanent popularity with the nurses. He was swathed in bandages and dripping with optimism. All the other patients envied him and copied his manner. Once we’d become presentable and ceased to be moral lepers, we all began to get visits from socialites and political bigwigs. People started telling each other in the drawing rooms that Professor Bestombes’ Neuro-Medical Center had become a temple and home, as it were, of the most intense patriotic fervor. Our visiting days came to be patronized not only by bishops, but also by an Italian duchess, a big munitions magnate, and before long by the personnel of the Opera and the Comedie Franchise. A beautiful young actress from the Comedie, who recited poetry like nobody’s business, came to my personal bedside and declaimed some superlatively heroic lines for my special benefit. As she spoke, her perverse red hair (she had the complexion that went with it) was tossed by extraordinary waves that sent vibrations straight to my perineum. When this divine creature questioned me about my feats of arms, I gave her so many poignant details that she began to devour me with her eyes. Deeply moved, she asked leave to have the most intense passages in my narrative framed in verse by a poet who happened to be one of her admirers. I consented without hesitation. Informed of this project, Professor Bestombes expressed his special approval. He even granted an interview on the subject to an “illustrated national weekly,” whose photographer took our picture all together on the hospital steps with the beautiful actress beside us. “In these tragic days,” cried Professor Bestombes, who never missed a trick, “it is the poet’s highest duty to revive our taste for the epic! This is no time for trivial artifice! Down with emasculated literature! A new soul has been born to us in the great and noble tumult of battle! The great patriotic renewal … The lofty summits to which our glory is destined! … We demand the sustaining grandeur of the epic! … For my part, I find it admirable that this sublime, creative, and never to be forgotten collaboration between a poet and one of our heroes should have taken place under our very eyes in this hospital which I direct!” Branledore, my roommate, whose imagination had been rather outdistanced by mine and who didn’t figure in the photograph, was seized with a keen, tenacious jealousy. He became my embittered rival for the palms of heroism. He made up new stories, he surpassed himself, no one could stop him, his exploits verged on delirium.

It was difficult for me to get the jump on him, to improve on his extravagances, yet none of us at the hospital resigned himself to defeat; in a fever of emulation we all vied with one another in composing brilliant pages of military “history” in which to figure sublimely. In those heroic romances we wore the skins of phantasmagoric characters, but deep within them our ludicrous selves trembled body and soul! I’d like to have seen people’s faces if they had found out what we were really like. The war had been going on too long. Our great friend Bestombes received the visits of innumerable foreign celebrities, neutrals, skeptics, and scientists of all persuasions. Spruce, besabered inspectors from the War Ministry passed through our wards, their military careers had been extended, they had been rejuvenated and revitalized with pay increases. So naturally they were generous with praise and citations. Everything was perfect. Bestombes and his wounded heroes were the pride of the medical profession.

My fair admirer from the Comédie came back and paid me a private visit, while her pet poet was completing the rhymed narrative of my exploits. One day I finally ran into this pale, anxious young man in one of the corridors. The doctors, he told me, had assured him that the fragility of his heart strings was well-nigh miraculous. Consequently these same doctors, always concerned with the protection of the frail, had kept him out of the army. To make up for which our young bard had undertaken, at the risk of his health and last spiritual energies, to forge “The Moral Cannon of Our Victory.” A magnificent? and it goes without saying? unforgettable weapon. Practically everything was unforgettable in those days.

I wasn’t going to complain, since he had picked me from among so many undeniably brave men as his hero! And, I have to admit, they honored me royally. It was magnificent. The recitation was given at the Comédie Française itself, as part of a so-called poetic afternoon. The whole hospital was invited. When my vibrant redhead appeared on the stage, striding grandly, her figure draped in the for once voluptuous folds of the tricolor, the whole audience, flushed with desire, rose to its feet and gave her one of those ovations that never seem to end. Naturally I had known what to expect, but my amazement was real all the same. I could not

conceal my stupefaction from my neighbors at hearing her, my magnificent friend, thrill and throb and sigh in such a way as to make the dramatic effect of the episode I had dreamed up for her more vivid and more moving. Her poet was miles beyond me for fantasy, he had monstrously magnified mine, enhanced it with flamboyant rhymes and high-sounding adjectives, which fell with a solemn reverberation on the breathless, admiring silence. Coming to the climax of a period, the most impassioned of the lot, the actress turned toward the box where Branledore and I and a few other wounded men were sitting, and held out her two magnificent arms as though offering herself to the most heroic among us. At that particular moment the poet was faithfully rendering a deed of awe-inspiring bravery that I had attributed to myself. I don't remember exactly what it was, but I'm sure it was something pretty good. Luckily, when it comes to heroism, people are willing to believe anything. The audience caught the meaning of her symbolic offering, turned in our direction, ecstatic, stamping, bellowing with joy, and clamored for the hero. Branledore took up the whole front row of the box and blotted out the rest of us. He hid us almost completely with his bandages. He did it on purpose, the bastard. But two of our comrades climbed up on chairs behind him so the crowd could admire them over his head and shoulders. They brought the house down.

I came close to crying out: "But it's all about me! Me and nobody else!" I knew my Branledore, we'd have exchanged insults in front of all those people, we might even have used our fists. So in the end he was the winner, he triumphed. Just as he'd planned, he had the whole storm of applause to himself. Defeated, we took refuge backstage, where fortunately we were feted again. That was some comfort. But our actress and inspiration wasn't alone in her dressing room. The poet, her poet, our poet was with her. He had the same weakness for young soldier boys as she did. They made it clear to me very artistically. A handsome offer. They repeated it, but I ignored their kind suggestions. I was the loser, because they had influence and things might have worked out very well. I left them abruptly, I was nettled. Silly of me, I was young.

To recapitulate: the aviators had snatched Lola away from me, the Argentines had taken Musyne, and now this harmonious invert had filched my magnificent actress. Sadly I left the Comédie as the last torches were being extinguished in the corridors and returned alone, without recourse to the streetcar, to our hospital, that mantrap plunked down in the tenacious mud of the rebellious suburbs.

7

The plain truth, I may as well admit it, is that I've never been really right in the head. But just then such fits of dizziness would come over me for no reason at all that I could easily have been run over. The war had given me the staggers. When it came to pocket money, all I could count on during my stay at the hospital was the few francs my mother managed to scrape up for me each week. So as soon as I could I went looking for little extras here and there, wherever I could find them. One of my old bosses looked like a likely prospect, and I went right over to see him.

I remembered opportunely that in a certain obscure period of my life shortly before the war I had worked as a helper for this Roger Puta who owned a jewelry shop near the Madeleine. My work for that loathsome jeweler consisted of menial jobs, such as polishing the silverware in the shop. There was lots of it, every shape and size, and it was hard to take care of in the gift-giving holiday season because it was always being handled. As soon as my classes were out at medical school where I was engaged in exacting and (because I kept flunking the exams) interminable studies, I hightailed it to the backroom of Monsieur Puta's shop, where I labored for two or three hours, until dinnertime, applying whiting to his chocolatières.

In return for my work, I was fed, copiously I have to admit, in the kitchen. Then in the morning before school, I had to take the watchdogs out for a piss. All that for forty francs a month. Puta's jewelry shop on the corner of the Rue Vignon sparkled with thousands of diamonds, each one of which cost several decades of my salary. They're still sparkling in the exact same place, by the way. When everybody was mobilized, this Puta got himself assigned to the auxiliaries and put under the special orders of a certain cabinet minister, whose car he drove from time to time. But he also made himself useful, unofficially of course, by supplying the ministry with jewels. The higher officials speculated, with gratifying results, on present and future transactions, and the longer the war went on, the more jewels were needed. Monsieur Puta got so many orders that he sometimes had trouble filling them.

When he was overworked, Monsieur Puta managed to look slightly intelligent because of the fatigue that tormented him, but only then. When rested, his face, in spite of his undeniably fine features, became so harmonious in its idiotic placidity that it would be hard not to carry a despairing memory of it with one to the grave.

His wife, Madame Puta, seldom left the cashier's desk, in a manner of speaking she and the desk were one. She had been brought up to be a jeweler's wife. That had been her parents'

ambition. She knew her duty inside and out. The prosperity of the cash drawer brought happiness to husband and wife. Not that Madame Puta was bad looking, not at all, she could even, like so many others, have been rather pretty, but she was so careful, so distrustful that she stopped short of beauty just as she stopped short of life?her hair was a little too well dressed, her smile a little too facile and sudden, and her gestures a bit too abrupt or too furtive. You racked your brains trying to figure out what was too calculated about her and why, you always felt uneasy when she came near you. This instinctive revulsion that shopkeepers inspire in anyone who goes near them and who knows what's what is one of the few consolations for being as down at heel as people who don't sell anything to anybody tend to be.

The petty cares of business were everything to Madame Puta; in this she resembled Madame Herote, but with a difference; in her case, they possessed her body and soul, just as God possesses his nuns.

And yet from time to time, she would give a thought to the world around her. For instance, she might indulge in some little expression of sympathy for parents with sons at the front.

"How dreadful this war must be for people with grown-up children!"

"Think before you shoot your mouth off!" her husband responded without delay. Such mawkishness found him ready and resolute. "I suppose there's no need of defending France?"

Good as gold, but first and foremost good patriots, stoics in short, they went to sleep every night of the war directly above their shop with its millions, a French fortune. In the brothels that he visited now and then, Monsieur Puta, though demanding, refused to be taken for a spendthrift. He'd set them straight at the outset. "I'm no Englishman, dearie, and I know the score. I'm just a little French soldier, and I'm not in a hurry." That was his opening statement. The girls respected him for his well-regulated way of taking his pleasure. He liked to enjoy himself, but couldn't be taken in, a real man. He knew human nature and took advantage of his knowledge to sell a few jewels to the assistant madame, who had no faith in stocks and bonds. As for his military career, Monsieur Puta was making impressive progress, from temporary discharges to permanent

deferments. After God knows how many providential medical examinations, he was finally exempted for good. One of the highest joys of his existence was to contemplate and if possible to handle a shapely thigh. In this one pleasure at least he got the better of his wife, who took no interest in anything but the business. Take a man and woman with otherwise equal qualities, you always seem to find a little more uneasiness in a man, however stagnant and narrow-minded. This Puta had just a dash of the artist in him. Lots of men are like that, their artistic leanings never go beyond a weakness for shapely thighs. Madame Puta was glad she had no children. She voiced her pleasure in being sterile so often that one day Monsieur Puta spoke of their satisfaction to the assistant madame. “Yes,” said the assistant madame. “But after all somebody’s children have to go. It’s a duty.” That was true, the war involved duties.

The cabinet minister whose car Puta drove had no children either. Cabinet ministers never have children.

Around 1913, at the same time as me, there was another helper doing menial jobs in the shop; his name was Jean Voireuse. At night he was some kind of super in the little theaters, and in the afternoon he delivered parcels for Puta. The pay was small, but he didn’t mind. He managed to make ends meet thanks to the Metro. He delivered his parcels on foot almost as quickly as if he’d taken the Metro, and kept the price of the ticket. All velvet. True, his feet smelled a little, quite a lot in fact, but he knew it and asked me to let him know when there were no customers in the shop so he could safely go in and settle his accounts with Madame Puta. As soon as she had the money, she’d send him out to the backroom with me. During the war again his feet stood him in good stead. He was reputed to be the fastest courier in his regiment. While on convalescent leave, he came to see me at the Bicętre fort, in fact it was then we decided to get in touch with our old boss. We didn’t let the grass grow under our feet. When we got to the Boulevard de la Madeleine they had just finished dressing the shop window …

“Well, well! Who’d have expected …!” Monsieur Puta was rather surprised to see us. “But I’m glad to see you all the same. Come right in! You’re looking well, Voireuse! Fine and dandy. But you, Bardamu, you look sick, my boy! Oh well, you’re young! You’ll recover!

You youngsters are in luck when all’s said and done! Great days, great experience for you!

Up there! And out in the open too! This is history, my boys. Make no mistake! And what history!”

We didn’t answer, we thought we’d let Monsieur Puta go on a while before touching him … And on he went:

“It’s rough in the trenches, I won’t deny that … But it’s no bed of roses here either, you know! … You boys have been wounded? All right, but I’m absolutely bushed. For two years now I’ve been on night duty! Do you know what that means? Exhausted! Worn to a frazzle! Oh my God! The streets of Paris at night! No lights … Driving a car, as often as not with the Minister in it! In a hurry! You simply can’t imagine! … I could get killed a dozen times every night! …”

“Oh yes,” Madame Puta put in, “and sometimes he drives the Minister’s wife too …”

“Oh yes, and it’s not over yet …”

“Dreadful!” we said in unison.

“What about the dogs?” Voireuse asked to be polite. “What’s become of them? Does somebody still take them out in the Tuileries?”

“I’ve had them put away! They were bad for business … German shepherds … the customers, you see …”

“A pity!” said his wife. “But the new dogs we have now are very nice, they’re Scotch … they smell a little … not like our German shepherds, do you remember, Voireuse? … They hardly smelled at all. We could shut them up in the shop even after the rain …”

“That’s right!” said Monsieur Puta. “Not like old Voireuse here with his feet! Do your feet still smell, Jean? You young scamp!”

“They still smell a little, I think,” said Voireuse.

At that moment some customers came in.

“I won’t keep you any longer, my boys,” said Monsieur Puta, intent on getting Jean out of the shop as quickly as possible. “Keep well, that’s the main thing! I won’t ask you where you’ve come from! Certainly not! Security first is my motto!”

At the word “security” Puta made a very serious face, like when giving back change … So that was the end of our visit. As we were leaving, Madame Puta gave us each twenty francs. The shop was polished as spick-and-span as a yacht, we were afraid to walk through because of our boots, which looked monstrous on the fine carpet.

“Oh, Roger! Look at them!” Madame Puta cried out. “Aren’t they comical! … They’re not in the habit anymore! They walk as if they’d stepped in something!”

“The habit will come back!” said Monsier Puta amiably, glad to be rid of us so quickly and cheaply.

Out in the street we realized we wouldn’t go far with our twenty francs each, but Voireuse had another idea.

“Come on,” he says, “we’ll go and see a lady I know, her son was a buddy of mine, killed on the Marne. I go and see his parents every week and tell them how their son was killed … They’re rich … The mother gives me a hundred francs or so every time … They say it makes them happy … So …”

“But what’ll I do? What’ll I say to this lady?”

“Well, you’ll tell her that you were there too … She’ll give you another hundred francs … They’re the right kind of rich … Take it from me … Not like that stinking Puta … They don’t count their pennies …”

“All right,” I said. “But are you sure she won’t ask me for details? … Because I didn’t know her son, see? … I’ll be flummoxed if she asks for …”

“No, no … don’t worry … Say the same as me … Just nod your head and say yes … Nothing to worry about! The woman is brokenhearted, so if someone comes and talks about her son it makes her happy … That’s all she wants … Anything at all … It’s easy …”

I wasn’t very enthusiastic, but I badly wanted the hundred francs, which struck me as providential and unusually easy to come by.

“All right,” I said finally. “But don’t expect me to make anything up, I’m warning you!

Promise? I’ll say the same as you, not a word more … How did he get killed anyway?”

“A shell hit him smack in the face, a pretty big one, at

Garance the place was called, on the Meuse front, on the bank of some river … Boy, they didn’t find ‘this much’ of him! Absolutely nothing left … a memory. And you know, he was a big man, strong and husky and athletic, but what would you expect? Nobody can stand up against a shell!”

“That’s a fact!”

“Wiped off the face of the earth! … His mother still finds it hard to believe! I’ve told her over and over again … She insists that he’s just missing … Crazy idea! … Missing! … It’s not her fault, she never saw a shell, she doesn’t see how a man can vanish into thin air … like a fart, and that it’s all over, especially when the man is her son …”

“It’s only natural.”

“By the way, I haven’t been to see her for two weeks … But you’ll see how it is when I go in … The mother receives me right away in the drawing room … It’s a beautiful house … You’ll see … so many curtains and carpets and mirrors you’d think you were in a theater … A hundred francs is nothing to them, they’ll hardly miss it … About like five francs to me … Today she’ll be good for two hundred … because she hasn’t seen me for two weeks … You’ll see, the servants with gilded buttons …”

At the Avenue Henri-Martin we turned left and went on a little way, then we came to a gate surrounded by trees in a little private road.

“See?” said Voireuse, when we were standing in front of it, “it’s practically a chateau … What did I tell you? The father’s supposed to be high up in the railroads … a big shot …”

“You sure he’s not a stationmaster?” I said, making a joke.

“Don’t be stupid! … There he is now … he’s coming to meet us …” But the old man didn’t come out right away. He was walking around the lawn, stooped over, talking to a soldier. We went nearer. I recognized the

soldier, it was the reservist I had met that night at Noirceur-sur-la-Lys, when I was on reconnaissance. I even remembered the name he'd given me: Robinson.

"Do you know that footslogger?" Voireuse asked me.

"Yes, I know him."

"Maybe he's a friend of theirs … They must be talking about the mother. I hope they don't prevent us from going to see her … Because she's the one mostly that forks over the money …"

The old gentleman came over to us.

"My dear friend," he said to Voireuse in a quavering voice. "It grieves me to tell you that since your last visit my poor wife has succumbed to our great sorrow … Last Thursday we left her alone for a moment, she had asked us to … She was in tears …" He couldn't finish his sentence. Suddenly he turned away and left us.

"I know you," I said to Robinson, as soon as the old gentleman was far enough away.

"And I know you …"

"What happened to the old lady?" I asked him.

"Well," he informed us, "she hanged herself the day before yesterday, that's all." He added:

"Of all the lousy luck! … She was my army godmother! … Such things only happen to me; A calamity! My first leave! … For six months I'd been looking forward to this day …"

Voireuse and I couldn't help laughing at Robinson's discomfiture. A nasty surprise if there ever was one, but her being dead didn't give us our two hundred smackers, and we'd made up a new story special for the occasion. So none of us was very happy.

"You and your big mealy mouth!" We were ragging Robinson, trying to get a rise out of him, "You thought you had a good thing, didn't you? A sweet little feed with the old folks?

Or maybe you thought you'd screw your fairy godmother? … serves you goddam right!" We couldn't stay there all day looking at the grass and laughing, so we all three together started off in the direction of Grenelle. We all counted our money, it didn't come to much. Seeing we had to get back to our respective hospitals and barracks that same evening, there was just enough for dinner at a bistro, and maybe there'd be a little something left over, but not enough to go upstairs at the cathouse. We went in anyway, but we only had a drink at the bar.

"Say," said Robinson, "it's good to see you again. But what do you think of that kid's mother? The bitch, hanging herself just when I'm due to arrive! … I won't forget her in a hurry! … Do you see me hanging myself? … Unhappy, you say? … I'd hang myself every day! … What about you?"

"Rich people are more sensitive," said Voireuse.

Voireuse had a good heart. "If I had six francs," he went on, "I'd go upstairs with the brunette over there by the slot machine …"

"Go ahead," we told him, "you'll tell us if she knows how to suck …" We rummaged in our pockets, but counting the tip there wasn't enough to give him his piece. Just enough for another coffee each and a cassis. When we'd finished, we went out and roamed around some more.

We broke up on the Place Vendôme and went our separate ways. Saying good-bye, we couldn't see one another, and we spoke softly because of the echoes. No light, it wasn't allowed.

I never saw Voireuse again. I've often run into Robinson. As for Jean Voireuse, it was the gas that got him on the Somme. He died two years later by the sea, in Brittany, in a navy sanatorium. He wrote to me twice when he first got there, but no more after that. He'd never seen the ocean. "You can't imagine how beautiful it is," he wrote me. "I bathe a little, it's good for my feet, but I think my voice is gone for good." That made him unhappy, because his big ambition was to get into a theater chorus some day.

The chorus is better paid and more artistic than being an ordinary super.

8

The army finally dropped me, I'd saved my guts, but my brains were scrambled for good. Undeniably. "Beat it!" they said. "You're no good for anything anymore."

"To Africa!" I said to myself. "The further the better." The ship that took me on board was a ship like any other, Consolidated Corsairs, that was the line. It was bound for the tropics with a cargo of cotton goods, officers, and civil servants.

That boat was so old that the copper plate with its birth date had been removed from the upper deck; the date was such ancient history it had inspired the passengers with fear and witticisms.

So they shoved me on board in the hope that I'd recuperate in the colonies. My wellwishers were dead set on my making my fortune. Personally I just wanted to get away, but a man should always try to look useful if he's not rich, it didn't look as if my studies would ever end, and I couldn't go on forever. I didn't have enough money to go to America. So

"Africa it is," I said, and let myself be steered to the tropics where, I was told, you were sure to get ahead fast, provided you behaved and were reasonably temperate. Those prognostics gave me food for thought. There wasn't much to be said for me, but my manners were all right, and I was self-effacing; deference came easy to me, I lived in constant fear of not being on time, but took good care never to get ahead of anybody. In short, I had delicacy.

After all, if you manage to escape alive from an international slaughterhouse run rampant, it's a sign of tact and discretion. But let's get back to our trip. It looked fairly promising as long as we were in European waters. In small, adenoidal, mutually suspicious groups, the passengers lolled and lounged in the shade between decks, in the toilets and in the smoking room. From morning to night they steeped themselves in Picon and gossip. They belched, they dozed, they shouted, and never expressed the least regret for anything they had left behind in Europe.

Our ship's name was the *Admiral Bragueton*. If it kept afloat on those tepid seas, it was only thanks to its paint. Any number of coats laid on, layer after layer, had given the *Admiral Bragueton* a kind of second hull, something like an onion. We were heading for Africa, the real, grandiose Africa of impenetrable forests, fetid swamps, inviolate wildernesses, where black tyrants wallowed in sloth and cruelty on the banks of neverending rivers. I would barter a pack of "Pilett" razor blades for big long elephant's tusks, gaudy-colored birds, and juvenile slaves. Guaranteed. That would be life! Nothing in common with the emasculated Africa of travel agencies and monuments, of railways and candy bars. Certainly not! We'd be seeing Africa in the raw, the real Africa! We the boozing passengers of the *Admiral Bragueton*.

But as soon as we'd passed the coast of Portugal, things started going bad. One morning we woke up in the midst of a steam bath, pervasive and alarming. The water in our glasses, the sea, the air, our sheets, our sweat, everything was hot, sultry. From then on, by night and day, it was impossible to have anything cool in your hands, under your ass, or in your throat, except the ice from the bar in your whisky. A dull despair descended on the passengers of the *Admiral Bragueton*, condemned to sitting permanently in the bar, held fast by little pieces of ice, exchanging threats and incoherent apologies after their card games.

It didn't take long. In that despondent changeless heat the entire human content of the ship congealed into massive drunkenness. People moved flabbily about like squid in a tank of tepid smelly water. From that moment on we saw, rising to the surface, the terrifying nature of white men, exasperated, freed from constraint, absolutely unbuttoned, their true nature, same as in the war. That tropical steam bath called forth instincts as August breeds toads and snakes on the fissured walls of prisons. In the European cold, under gray, puritanical northern skies, we seldom get to see our brothers' festering cruelty except in times of carnage, but when roused by the foul fevers of the tropics, their rottenness rises to the surface. That's when the frantic unbuttoning sets in, when filth triumphs and covers us entirely. It's a biological confession. Once work and cold weather cease to constrain us, once they relax their grip, the white man shows you the same spectacle as a beautiful beach when the tide goes out: the truth, fetid pools, crabs, carrion, and turds. Once we had passed Portugal, everybody on board started unleashing his instincts, ferociously; alcohol helped and so did the blissful feeling conferred, especially on soldiers and civil servants, by the knowledge that the trip was absolutely free of charge. The knowledge that for four consecutive weeks their bed, board, and liquor won't cost a thing is in itself enough to make most people delirious with thrift. Consequently, when it became known that, alone of all the ship's passengers, I had paid my own fare, I was looked upon as a shameless and intolerable swine.

If on leaving Marseille I had had some experience of colonial society, I would have gone down on my knees and begged the pardon and indulgence of the colonial infantry officer I kept running into, the highest in rank of those on board, for my un-worthiness, and perhaps, for safety's sake, I'd also have humbled myself before the senior civil servant. Then those phan-tasmagorical passengers might have tolerated my presence in their midst and nothing would have happened. But I was ignorant, and my foolhardiness in supposing that I was entitled to breathe the same air as they almost cost me my life. One can never be too anxious. Thanks to a certain ingenuity, I lost nothing but what selfrespect I had left. This is what happened. Some time after the Canary Islands, I learned from one of the stewards that my fellow passengers, by common accord, thought me affected, not to say insolent … that they suspected me of being a pimp and a pederast … something of a cocaine addict on the side … but only on the side … Then the suspicion made its way around that I must have left France to escape the consequences of certain heinous crimes. But I was only at the beginning of my troubles. At that point I learned that on this line it was customary to view paying passengers with extreme caution, accompanied by persecution; I'm speaking of those who were not traveling free, either on military transportation orders or on the basis of some bureaucratic arrangement, for as everyone knows, the colonies belong to the upper reaches of the administration. After all there are few plausible reasons for an unknown civilian to venture into those parts … A spy, a suspicious character … they found a thousand reasons for giving me sinister looks, the officers straight in the eye, the ladies with a knowing smile. After a while, even the deck hands and stewards, encouraged by the passengers, took to exchanging heavily caustic remarks behind my back. In the end no one doubted that I was the biggest and most intolerable, in fact the only out and out blackguard on board. A promising outlook.

My neighbors at table were four toothless and bilious postal officials from Gabon. They had been friendly to me, chummy in fact at the start of the voyage; now they never said a word to me. They had tacitly agreed that I was a man to be watched. I seldom left my cabin, and then only with infinite precautions. The air was so hot it weighed on our skins like a solid. Behind my bolted door I lay naked, trying to imagine what plan those diabolical passengers had cooked up to destroy me. I didn't know anyone on board, yet they all seemed to know me. An exact description of me must have taken instant form in their minds, like that of a famous criminal published in the newspapers.

Through no fault of mine, I had been cast in the indispensable role of the "foul and loathsome villain," shame of the human race, whose presence has been recorded down through the centuries, who is as well known to everyone as God and the Devil, but who during his passage on this earth is so polymorphous and evasive as to elude everyone's grasp. For this "villain" to be at last isolated, identified, and cornered, exceptional circumstances had been needed, such as were to be met with only in the narrow confines of this ship.

A great moral carnival was in the offing aboard the *Admiral Bragueton*. The "unclean beast" would not escape his fate. That was me.

This in itself made the trip worthwhile. Isolated among these spontaneous enemies, I labored to identify them without their noticing. Especially in the morning, I was able to watch them with impunity through the porthole of my cabin. Before breakfast, covered with hair from pubis to eyebrows and from their rectums to the soles of their feet, they would emerge to take the air in pajamas that were transparent in the sunlight; or glass in hand, sprawled against the rail, they would belch and retch, especially the captain with the bulging bloodshot eyes, whose liver started plaguing him at daybreak. Regularly at dawn he would ask his cronies about me, curious to know if I hadn't been "tossed overboard" yet, "like a gob of spit"! And he'd illustrate his remark by projecting a turgid oyster into the frothing sea. Boy oh boy!

The *Admiral* wasn't getting ahead very fast, just groaning along from roll to roll. It was more like a sickness than a voyage. As I examined the members of the morning council from my porthole, they all seemed rather seriously ill, malarial, alcoholic, syphilitic in all likelihood; at a distance of thirty feet, their visible decay was some consolation for my own troubles. These bigmouths, after all, were just as defeated as I was … still bragging, nothing more! That was the only difference! … The mosquitoes had worked them over, sucking their blood and pumping their veins full of poisons that would never go away … Treponemas were filing away their arteries … Alcohol was corroding their livers … The sun was cracking their kidneys … Crab lice were clinging to their pubic hair and eczema to the skin of their bellies … The searing light would scorch their retinas! … In not so long a time what would be left of them? A bit of brain … To do what with, I ask you! … where they were going? … To commit suicide? Where they were going a brain wouldn't do them a bit of good … No two ways … it's no joke growing old in a place where there's nothing to do … but look at yourself in a mirror with verdigris for silvering, and see yourself getting seedier and seedier, more and more decrepit … Rot sets in quickly in the green mansions, especially when it's atrociously hot.

The North at least preserves your flesh; Northerners are pale once and for all. Between a dead Swede and a young man who has had a bad night there's not much to choose. But the day after a colonial lands, he's already full of maggots. Those infinitely laborious little worms have been waiting for him personally, and

they'll stay with him a lot longer than life will. He's a bag of worms, that's all.

We had another week at sea before putting in to Bragamance, the first of the promised lands, I felt as if I were living in a case of dynamite. I had just about given up eating for fear of sitting down at their table or crossing the deck in the daytime. I'd stopped talking altogether. I was never seen taking the air. It would have been hard to be as little in evidence on that ship as I was and yet stay on board.

My cabin steward, a family man, was kind enough to inform me that those dashing colonial officers had lifted their glasses and sworn a solemn oath to slap my face at the first opportunity and then chuck me overboard. When I asked him why, he didn't know and asked me in turn what I had done to warrant so much hard feeling. We were left with our perplexity. It was unlikely to be cleared up. They didn't like my face, that's all. You won't catch me taking another trip with people so hard to please. In addition, they had so much time on their hands, sequestered with themselves for thirty whole days, that it didn't take much to stir them up. And besides, when you stop to think about it, at least a hundred people must want you dead in the course of an average day, the ones in line behind you at the ticket window in the Métro, the ones who look up at your apartment when they haven't got one themselves, the ones who wish you'd finish pissing and give them a chance, your children and a lot more. It happens all the time, and you get used to it. On a boat this same impatience is more noticeable, which makes it more upsetting.

In that bubbling cauldron, the suint of those scalded beings is concentrated, the presentiment of the vast colonial solitude that will soon bury them and their destinies and make them groan like the dying. They cling, they bite, they rend, they froth at the mouth. My importance on the ship increased prodigiously from day to day. My rare appearances at table, silent and stealthy as I tried to make them, took on the magnitude of significant events. The moment I entered the dining room, the hundred and twenty passengers gave a start and began to whisper …

Advancing from malignant suppositions to slanderous conclusions, the colonial officers at the captain's table, fortified with *apéritif* after *apéritif*, the tax collectors, and especially the lady schoolteachers on their way back to the Congo (of these there was quite an assortment on board the *Admiral Bragueton*) puffed me up to infernal proportions. On boarding the ship in Marseille, I had been nothing, just a dreamy sort of nobody, but now, thanks to the concentrated attention of all those alcoholics and frustrated vaginas, I found myself changed beyond recognition, endowed with alarming prestige. The captain of the ship, a shady, breezy, racketeering type, had gone out of his way to shake hands with me at the start. When he crossed my path now, he didn't even seem to know me, it was as if I'd been wanted for some sordid crime, guilty from the start … Guilty of what? When men can hate without risk, their stupidity is easily convinced, the motives supply themselves.

From what I seemed to discern of the compact malevolence that held me in its vise, the female section of the conspiracy was masterminded by one of the schoolteachers. She was going back to the Congo to die, or so at least I hoped, the bitch. Almost always she was trailing around after the officers, so handsome in their resplendent tight-fitting tunics and further embellished by the oath they had sworn to crush me like a noisome slug well before the next port of call. They wondered out loud whether I would be as repulsive flattened out as I was erect. In short, they were having a fine time. The schoolteacher whetted their fury, called down thunders on the deck of the *Admiral Bragueton*, resolved to know no rest until I had been picked up gasping, punished forever for my imaginary impertinence, chastised for daring to exist, brutally beaten, bruised and bleeding, imploring pity under the boot and fist of one of those heroes, whose muscular prowess and spectacular rage she was burning to admire. A scene of high carnage, from which her weary ovaries promised themselves an awakening. As good as being raped by a gorilla. Time was passing, and it's dangerous to keep the *afficionados* waiting too long. I was the bull. The whole ship was clamoring, quivering from port to starboard.

The sea enclosed us in that boiler-plated circus. Even the engine-room crew knew what was going on. And since we only had three days ahead of us before putting into port, three decisive days, several matadors volunteered. The more I avoided the showdown, the more aggressive, the more impending they became. The executioners began to rehearse. They cornered me between two cabins, at a bend in the corridor. I escaped by the skin of my teeth, but going to the toilet was getting downright dangerous. With only three days to go, I decided to forgo the needs of nature. The portholes were all I needed. Crushing hatred and boredom were all around me. It can't be denied, the boredom on ships is something unbelievable; to tell the truth, it's cosmic. It fills the sea, the ship, the heavens. It's enough to unhinge the soundest of minds, so what would you expect of those chimerical deadheads?

A sacrifice! And I was the victim. Things came to a head one evening after dinner, at which, ravaged by hunger, I had put in an appearance. I bent over my plate and didn't budge,

I didn't even dare to take out my handkerchief to wipe the sweat off my brow. Nobody had ever eaten his

dinner more discreetly. From the engines a faint, continuous vibration rose up under my behind. My table companions must have known what sentence had been passed on me, for to my surprise they started talking to me freely and amiably about duels and stabbings, and asking me questions … Just then the schoolteacher from the Congo, the one whose breath was so strong, appeared in the lounge. I had barely time to notice that she was wearing a sumptuous lace evening dress. With nervous haste she sat down at the piano and played, if you can call it playing, a number of pieces, always skipping the finale. The atmosphere became intensely furtive and strained.

I jumped up and ran, hoping to take refuge in my cabin. I had almost reached it when one of the colonial officers, the chestiest and most muscular of the lot, barred my way, without violence but firmly. “Suppose we go up on deck!” he enjoined me. We had only a few steps to go. For the occasion he was wearing his gold-braidiest cap, and he had buttoned his buttons from collar to fly, something he hadn’t done since our departure. So this was to be a full-dress dramatic ceremony! A tight spot for me, my heart was pounding on a level with my belly button.

This preamble, this abnormal full dress made me foresee a slow and painful execution. That officer looked to me like a chunk of the war, obstinate, inexorable, murderous, which someone had suddenly plunked down in front of me.

Behind him, blocking the doorway, appeared four junior officers, vigilant in the extreme, the escort of Doom.

Flight was impossible. The speech that followed must have been carefully rehearsed. “Sir, you have before you Captain Frémizon of the colonial army! In the name of my comrades in arms and of the passengers on this ship, who are justly indignant at your unspeakable behavior, I have the honor to demand an explanation! … Certain remarks you have made about us since we left Marseille are intolerable! … If you have any grievances, sir, the time has come to state them out loud! … to proclaim audibly what you have been saying in a shameful undertone for the last twenty-one days! To tell us at last what you think! …”

On hearing these words I was very much relieved. I had feared some sudden deathblow impossible to parry, but in talking, the major was offering me a way out. Any possibility of cowardice becomes a glowing hope if you’re not a fool. That’s my opinion. Never be picky and choosy about means of escaping disembowelment, or waste your time trying to find reasons for the persecution you’re a victim of. Escape is good enough for the wise.

“Captain!” I replied, putting into my voice all the conviction of which I was capable under the circumstances. “What an extraordinary mistake you are in danger of making! You! Me!

How can you think me capable of such ignominious sentiments? How monstrously unjust!

Indeed it is more than I can bear! When only yesterday I was fighting for our beloved country! When over the years my blood has mingled with yours in innumerable battles!

Oh, Captain, sir, how could you think of crushing me beneath such an injustice?” Then, addressing the whole group:

“What abominable slander has abused you, gentlemen? Leading you to imagine that I, to all intents and purposes your brother, would dream of spreading foul calumnies about heroic officers! This is too much! Really too much!” And I went on: “Oh, for such a thing to happen at the very moment when these heroes, these incomparable heroes, are preparing to resume, with what courage I need not say, their sacred duty of safeguarding our immortal colonial empire! Where the most glorious soldiers of our race have covered themselves with eternal glory. The Mangins! the Faidherbes! the Gallienis! … Oh, Captain! To suspect *me!* Of *this!* “

At that point I pulled up short. I hoped my silence would impress them. Luckily it did for a moment. Thereupon, without delay, taking advantage of the oratorical armistice, I went straight up to the captain and, in an access of emotion, gripped both his hands. With his hands enclosed in mine I felt fairly safe. Still clasping them, I continued, as volubly as ever, and while assuring him that he was right, a thousand times right, suggested that we make a fresh start, but get our signals straight this time. This unbelievable misunderstanding, I assured him, had been brought about by my stupid though natural timidity! I admitted that my behavior could reasonably have been interpreted as unconscionable disdain by the ladies and gentlemen present, these “heroes and charmers … this providential conclave of astounding characters and talents … Not forgetting the incomparably musical ladies, the ornaments of our good ship! …” After making this profuse and elaborate apology, I implored them to admit me without delay or restriction to their joyous patriotic brotherhood … in which I hoped, now and forever, to cut an admirable figure. And of course without

releasing the major's hands, I redoubled my eloquence.

As long as a soldier isn't killing, he's a child and easily amused. Since he is not in the habit of thinking, it costs him a crushing effort to understand when spoken to. Captain Frémizon wasn't killing me, he wasn't drinking, and he wasn't doing anything with his hands or feet. He was only trying to think. For him that was much too much. In short, I'd caught him by the head.

Gradually, during this ordeal by humiliation, I felt my selfrespect weakening, weakening a little more, seeping away, and finally abandoning me completely, officially as it were. Say what you please, that's a beautiful moment. After that incident I became infinitely light and free, morally speaking of course. Fear is probably, more often than not, the best means of getting you out of a tight spot. Since that day I've never felt the need of any other weapons, or virtues for that matter.

The captain couldn't make up his mind, and his friends, who had come there expressly to wipe up my blood and play knucklebones with my dispersed teeth, had to content themselves with catching words in mid-air. The civilians who had come rushing, tingling with eagerness at the news of an impending *corrida* were looking very dangerous. Since I didn't know exactly what I was talking about, but only that I'd better keep it lyrical at all costs, I held on to the captain's hands and stared at an imaginary point in the cottony fog through which the *Admiral Bragueton* was making its way, puffing and spitting from one turn of the propeller to the next. Finally, to wind up my harangue, I ventured to raise one arm above my head, releasing one of the captain's hands, but only one, and flung myself into my peroration: "Gentlemen: Aren't we all agreed that brave men will always come to an understanding in the end? So damn it all, Vive la France! Vive la France!" That was Sergeant Branledore's gimmick. And once again it worked. That was the only time France ever saved my life, otherwise the opposite has been closer to the truth. I observed a moment's hesitation in my audience?after all, it's hard for an officer, however ill-disposed, to strike a civilian who has just shouted "Vive la France!" as loud as I had. That hesitation saved me.

I reached into the group of officers, grabbed two arms at random, and invited everybody to come to the bar and drink to my health and our reconciliation. The heroes resisted for barely a minute, and then we drank for two hours. But the females, silent and increasingly disappointed, kept their eyes on us. Through the portholes of the bar I saw the obstinate schoolteacher-pianist prowling like a hyena, surrounded by other females. The bitches had a strong suspicion that I'd conned myself out of the trap, and were determined to nab me at the next turn. Meanwhile, men among men, we went on drinking under the useless but stupefying electric fan, which since the Canaries had been wearing itself out churning the tepid, cottony atmosphere. Still, I had to keep up my verve and spout the kind of talk … nothing too difficult … that would appeal to my new friends. For fear of putting my foot in it, I overflowed with patriotic admiration, and kept asking those heroes, one after another, for stories and more stories of colonial feats of arms. War stories, like dirty stories, appeal to the military of all countries. The best way to make a sort of peace, a fragile armistice to be sure, but precious all the same, with men, officers or not, is to let them bask and wallow in childish self-glorification. There's no such thing as intelligent vanity. It's an instinct. And you'll never find a man who is not first and foremost vain. The role of admiring doormat is about the only one that one man is glad to tolerate in another. With these soldiers I had no need to tax my imagination. It was enough to appear impressed. It's easy to ask for more and more war stories. Those boys were crammed full of them, It was like the good old hospital days. After each story I made sure to express my approbation, as Branledore had taught me, with a glowing phrase: "Splendid! Why, that deserves to go down in History!" There's a formula that can't be beat! Little by little, the group I had wormed my way into decided that I was all right. They started telling the same kind of cock-and-bull war stories as I had heard in the old days and later dished out myself in imagination contests with my pals in the hospital. Except their setting was different, their fairy tales happened in the jungles of the Congo instead of the Vosges or Flanders.

Once Captain Frémizon, the one who a moment before had volunteered to purge the ship of my putrid presence, perceived that I listened more attentively than anyone else, he began to give me credit for no end of delightful qualties. His arterial flux seemed attenuated by the effect of my original praises, his vision cleared, his bloodshot, alcoholic eyes even began to sparkle despite his besotted state, and the sprinkling of doubts about his own worth, which he had somehow conceived deep within him and which assailed him in times of extreme depression, were for a time adorably dissipated by the miraculous effect of my intelligent and pertinent comments.

No doubt about it, I was a creator of euphoria! I had them slapping their thighs for all they were worth! I alone knew how to make life worth living in spite of the agonizing humidity!

Wasn't I the most inspired of listeners?

As we were thus shooting the shit, the *Admiral Bragueton* began to slow down, she seemed to be making

hardly any headway; not an atom of breeze around us, we must have been skirting the coast, moving as sluggishly as if the sea had been molasses. The sky above us was molasses too, a black, viscous mass that I eyed hungrily. I'd have liked best to get back into the night, even sweating and groaning, no matter how! Frémizon went on and on with his stories, I had the impression that land was near, but my plan for escape filled me with alarm … Gradually our conversation ceased to be military and became first ribald, then frankly filthy, and in the end so incoherent that it was hard to keep it going. One after another of the company gave up and fell asleep, crushed under the weight of their snores, a nasty kind of sleep that scraped the caverns of their noses. That was the time to get away. One must never miss up on those remissions of cruelty that nature manages to impose on the most vicious and aggressive of this world's organisms. By then we were anchored a short distance from the coast. All we could see of the shore was some lanterns moving back and forth.

Very quickly a hundred bobbing canoes full of screeching black men came crowding around the ship. There were black men all over the decks, offering their services. In a few seconds I carried the few bundles I had done up in secret to the gangway and slipped down it behind one of the boatmen, whose features and movements were almost entirely hidden from me by the darkness. At the bottom of the steps, on a level with the plashing water, I wondered anxiously where we were going.

"Where are we?" I asked.

"At Bambola-Fort-Gono," the shadow answered.

We pushed off and paddled hard. To make us go faster I helped him.

I had time to get one last look at my menacing fellow passengers. In the light of the cabin lamps, laid low by apathy and gastritis, they grunted and fermented in their sleep. Bloated and sprawling, they all looked alike now, officers, civil servants, engineers, and traders, pimply, potbellied and swarthy, intermingled and more or less identical. Dogs look like wolves when they're asleep.

A few moments later I was back on land. Under the trees the night was thicker than ever, and behind the night lay all the complicities of silence.

In this colony of Bambola-Bragamance the Governor reigned triumphant over everybody. His soldiers and civil servants hardly dared breathe when he deigned to let his eyes fall on them.

Far below these notables, the resident traders seemed to thieve and thrive more easily than in Europe. Not one coconut, not one peanut in the entire colony evaded their brigandage. As fatigue and ill health overcame the civil servants, it began to dawn on them that they'd been had, that all they had gained by being sent out here was braid and forms to fill out and very little pay. So naturally they looked at the traders with a bilious eye. The military faction, even more dull witted than the other two, subsisted on a diet of colonial glory, washed down by quantities of quinine and miles of red tape.

Understandably, a life spent waiting for the thermometer to go down made everybody more and more cantankerous. The consequence was private and collective quarrels, preposterous and interminable, between the military and the administration, between the administration and the traders, between these two in temporary alliance and the military, between the whole lot of them and the black population, and finally between blacks and blacks. The little energy that hadn't been sapped by malaria, thirst, and the heat was consumed by hatred so fierce and deep seated that it wasn't uncommon for these colonials to drop dead on the spot, poisoned by themselves like scorpions.

Nevertheless, this virulent anarchy was held in check, like crabs in a basket, by a hermetic police structure. The civil servants griped in vain, for the Governor, to keep his colony in subjection, was able to recruit all the moth-eaten mercenaries he needed, impoverished blacks driven to the coast by debts, defeated by the law of supply and demand, and needful of something to eat. These recruits were taught the law and how to admire the Governor. The Governor seemed to wear all the gold in his treasury on his uniform … in the blazing sunshine, it surpassed belief, even without the plumes.

He went to Vichy for the cure every year, and he never read anything but the *Official Gazette*. A number of the civil servants cherished the hope that he'd sleep with their wives some day, but the Governor didn't care for women. He didn't care for anything. He survived each new epidemic of yellow fever like a charm, while so many of the men who'd have liked to bury him died like flies at the first whiff of fever.

There was a story that one Fourteenth of July, as he was reviewing the troops of the Residency, caracoling up ahead of his Spahi guards who were carrying a flag as big as a house, some sergeant, delirious with fever no doubt, rushed out in front of him, shouting:

“Get back, you jerk!” It seems the Governor was very much upset by this outrage which, as it happened, was never satisfactorily explained.

It is hard to get a faithful look at people and things in the tropics because of the colors that emanate from them. In the tropics colors and things are in a turmoil. To the eye, a small sardine can lying upon the road at midday can take on the dimensions of an accident. You’ve got to watch out. It’s not just the people who are hysterical down there, objects are the same way. Life only becomes tolerable at nightfall, but then almost immediately the darkness is taken over by swarms of mosquitoes. Not one or two or a hundred, but billions of them. Survival under those conditions is quite an achievement. A carnival by day, a colander by night, a quiet war.

When the hut you sleep in has filled at last with silence and the air is almost fit to breathe, the termites, those loathsome beasts eternally engaged in eating away the uprights of your cabin, get to work. The day a tornado hits this treacherous filigree, whole streets will go up in dust.

The town of Fort-Gono where I’d landed, the capital of Bragamance, was perched precariously between sea and jungle, but supplied, adorned, so to speak, with enough banks, brothels, cafés, café terraces, and even a recruiting office, to make it a small metropolis. There was even a Place Faidherbe and a Boulevard Bugeaud, in case you wanted to take a walk. The whole was a clump of gleaming edifices surrounded by jagged rocks, riddled with larvae, trampled by generations of soldiers and officials. At about five o’clock the military element would grouse and gripe over their *apéritifs*, the price of which, as it happened, had just gone up when I arrived. A delegation of consumers was about to petition the Governor to issue a decree enjoining the cafe owners from playing fast and loose with the prices of absinthe and cassis. If some of the regulars were to be believed, the very foundations of colonization were threatened by ice. Indeed it cannot be denied that the introduction of ice into the colonies has sparked off a process of devirilization. Riveted by force of habit to his iced *apéritif*, the colonial could no longer hope to dominate the climate by stoicism alone. The Faidherbes, the Stanleys, the Marchands, be it noted in passing, had nothing but good to say of the tepid, muddy beer, wine, and water they drank for years without complaining. There you have it. That’s how colonies are lost.

I learned plenty more in the shade of the palm trees which, all along those avenues of precarious dwellings, throve in provocative contrast. It was only that garish raw greenery which prevented the place from looking exactly like La Garenne-Bezons. At nightf all the native hookers came out in strength, wending their way between clouds of hungry mosquitoes armed with yellow fever. There were Sudanese girls as well, offering the passerby the treasures under their loincloths. For extremely moderate prices you could treat yourself to a whole family for an hour or two. I’d have liked to flit from twat to vagina, but necessity obliged me to look for work.

The director of the Compagnie Pordurière du Petit Congo, so I heard, was looking for an inexperienced man to take charge of one of the trading posts in the bush. I went without delay to offer my incompetent but enthusiastic services. The director’s reception of me was not exactly friendly. That lunatic ?I may as well call a spade a spade?lived not far from the Government House in a spacious straw bungalow built on piles. Before even looking at me, he fired several questions about my past, then, somewhat appeased by my naive answers, his contempt took a more indulgent turn. Still, he did not yet see fit to offer me a seat.

“To judge by your papers, you know something about medicine?” he observed. I replied that I had indeed studied for a time in that field.

“It’ll come in handy,” he said. “How about some whisky?” I told him I didn’t drink. “Smoke?” Again I declined. Such abstinence surprised him. In fact he scowled.

“I’m suspicious of employees who don’t smoke and drink … Are you a pederast by any chance? … No? Too bad! … They don’t steal as much … That’s been my experience … They get attached … Well,” he was kind enough to hedge. “By and large I seem to have noticed that quality, that advantage, in pederasts … Maybe you’ll prove me wrong …” And changing the subject: “You’re hot, aren’t you? You’ll get used to it. You’ll have to. How was your trip?”

“Uncomfortable!” I said.

“Well, my friend, you haven’t seen a thing. Come and tell me what you think of this country when you’ve spent a year in Bikomimbo, the place where I’m sending you to replace that joker …”

His Negress, squatting beside the table, was fiddling with her feet and scraping them with a little piece of wood.

“Beat it, you slut!” her master flung at her. “Go and call the house boy! And get me some ice while you’re at

it!”

The boy took his time coming. Infuriated, the Director sprang to his feet and received him with two brutal slaps in the face and the same number of resounding kicks in the gut.

“These people will be the death of me,” the Director predicted with a sigh and slumped back into his armchair that was covered with dirty, rumpled, yellow canvas.

“Look, old man,” he said, suddenly grown friendly, as though liberated for a while by his access of brutality. “Would you mind handing me my whip and my quinine … there on the table … I oughtn’t to get so excited … It’s stupid to fly off the handle like that …” From his house we overlooked the river port, which shimmered through dust so dense, so compact, that we heard the clanking and thumping more clearly than we could see what was going on. On the shore files of black men were busy, encouraged by whips and curses, unloading hold after hold of ships that were never empty, climbing up flimsy, teetering gangplanks with big baskets balanced on their heads?like vertical ants. Through a scarlet haze I saw them coming and going in jerky lines. Some of these working shapes carried an extra black spot on their backs, those were mothers toting their babies along with their sacks of palm cabbage. I wonder if ants can do that.

“Doesn’t it always seem like Sunday here?” the Director joked. “So jolly! So colorful! And the females always naked. You’ve noticed? Good-lookers too, don’t you agree? Of course it seems strange when you’ve just arrived from Paris, I won’t deny it. And look at us! Always in white ducks. Like at the seashore! Aren’t we a sight for sore eyes? All dressed up for First Communion! It’s always a holiday here, take it from me! Day in and day out, just one glorious Fourteenth of July! And it’s like this all the way to the Sahara! Think of it!” He stopped talking, sighed, grunted, said “Shit!” two or three times, mopped his forehead, and started in again.

“Out where the Company’s sending you, it’s deep in the bush. Very damp! … Ten days’

trip from here … First by sea … Then up the river … The river’s all red, you’ll see! … And on the other side it’s the Spaniards … The man you’re replacing at the post up there is a rotter … just between you and me … He simply won’t send us his accounts … Nothing we can do … we’ve sent him letter after letter! … A man doesn’t stay honest long when he’s alone! … You’ll see! … He’s written, says he’s sick … Big deal! Sick! I’m sick too! What does he mean sick? We’re all sick. You’ll be sick yourself before you know it! That’s no excuse! What do we care if he’s sick! … The Company comes first! When you get there, take inventory, that’s the essential! … There’s food enough for three months and merchandise for at least a year … You won’t run short! … Don’t start at night, whatever you do! … Be on your guard! … He’s got his own niggers, he’ll send them down the river to pick you up, maybe they’ll chuck you overboard. I bet he’s trained them! They’re as rascally as he is! Fact! He’s probably dropped a hint to those niggers about you! … That’s the kind of thing they do around here! And be sure to take your quinine with you, your own, get it before you leave! … He might doctor his, I wouldn’t put it past him!” The Director thought he’d given me enough advice and stood up to say good-bye. The tin roof over our heads seemed to weigh at least two thousand tons, it absorbed all the heat of the day and sent it down on us. We were both making faces with the heat. We could just as well have dropped dead.

“Perhaps,” he said, “there’s no point in our meeting again before you leave, Bardamu!

Everything wears one out so down here! Well, no, maybe I’ll run down to the warehouses before you go and see how you’re making out … You’ll hear from us when you get there … There’s a mail every month … The mail goes out from here … Well, good luck!” And he vanished into the shadow between his tropical helmet and his jacket. I could clearly see the tendons in the back of his neck, curved like two fingers pressing against his head. He turned around again:

“Don’t forget to tell that loafer to come back here in a hurry … I’ve got a few things to say to him! … And not to waste time on the way! Oh, the rat! I only hope he doesn’t croak before he gets here! … That would be a shame! A bleeding shame! Oh, the blackguard!” One of his blacks went ahead of me with a big lantern and took me to the place where I was to live before leaving for the Bikomimbo of my dreams.

We passed through avenues full of people who seemed to have come out for a stroll after dark. The night, hammered by gongs, was all around us, interspersed by brief snatches of song as incoherent as sobs, the big black night of the hot countries, with its brutal tom-tom heart that always beats too fast.

My young guide glided along easily on bare feet. There must have been Europeans in the bushes, you could hear them wandering about, their easily recognizable white men’s voices, aggressive and hypocritical. The bats came whirling and weaving through the swarms of insects attracted by our light. Under every leaf of the trees there must have been at least one cricket, to judge by the deafening din.

Halfway up a hill we were stopped at a crossroads by a group of native riflemen arguing around a coffin draped in a big French flag.

It was somebody who had died in the hospital, and they didn't know exactly where to bury him. Their orders were vague. Some wanted to put him in one of the fields down below, some insisted on a garden at the top of the hill. The question had to be decided one way or the other, so the boy and I joined in the discussion.

In the end the pallbearers decided for the lower rather than the upper burial ground, because it was easier to walk downhill. Then we met three young white boys, the kind that in Europe go to rugby matches on Sunday, enthusiastic, noisy, pale-faced spectators. Like myself they were employed by the Societé Pordurière and were kind enough to show me the way to the unfinished shanty where my portable folding bed was temporarily situated. The edifice when we got there was absolutely empty except for a few utensils and my socalled bed. As soon as I lay down on that wobbly filiform object, two dozen bats emerged from the corners and took to whishing back and forth like a volley of fans over my apprehensive repose.

The young black, my guide, came back to offer me his intimate services. Then, disappointed when I told him I wasn't in the mood that evening, he offered to introduce me to his sister. I'd have been curious to know how he expected to find his sister in such darkness.

Not far away the village tom-tom chopped my patience into little bits. Thousands of hardworking mosquitoes took possession of my legs, but I didn't dare set foot on the ground because of the scorpions and snakes which, I assumed, had started on their abominable hunting expeditions. The snakes had plenty of rats to choose from, rats were gnawing away at everything that can be gnawed, I heard them on the wall, on the floor, and quivering, ready to drop, on the ceiling.

Finally the moon rose, and things were a little quieter in the shanty. All things considered, life in the colonies was no great shakes.

Nevertheless, the next day came, a steaming cauldron. An enormous desire to go back to Europe took hold of me body and soul. Only one thing prevented me from clearing out?

lack of money. That was enough. Anyway, I only had another week to spend in Fort-Gono before going to my job in Bikomimbo, which I'd heard described so delightfully. The biggest building in Fort-Gono after the Governor's Palace was the hospital. I ran into it wherever I went; I couldn't walk a hundred yards in the town without coming across one of its pavilions, smelling faintly of carbolic acid. From time to time I ventured down to the docks to watch my anemic young colleagues, whom the Compagnie Pordurière recruited in France by emptying whole settlement houses, at work. They seemed possessed by a bellicose haste to unload freighter after freighter without stopping. "Harbor fees are so dreadfully costly!" they kept saying, sincerely distressed, as if it had been their own money. They belabored the black porters with a will. They were conscientious, you couldn't deny it, and they were also flabby, heartless sons-of-bitches. In other words, they were well chosen, as mindlessly enthusiastic as any employer could dream of. Sons that would have delighted my mother, worshiping their bosses, if only she could have had one all to herself, a son she could have been proud of in the eyes of the world, a real legitimate son. Those half-baked little specimens had come to tropical Africa to offer their flesh, their blood, their lives, their youth to their bosses, martyrs for twenty-two francs a day (minus deductions), and they were happy, yes, happy down to their last red corpuscle, for which ten million mosquitoes were lying in wait.

The colonies make these little clerks fat or make them thin; either way they hold them fast; there are only two ways to die under the sun, the fat way and the thin way. There's no other. You may have a preference, but it's your constitution that decides whether you get fat or whether the bones jab at your skin.

The Director up there on the red cliff, cavorting diabolically with his Negress under the tin roof with the ten thousand kilos of sunshine on it would be no better off when his time was up. He was the skinny kind. Sure, he was putting up a fight. It looked as if he could beat the climate. Looked! In reality he was crumbling even faster than the others. The story was that he'd thought up a beautiful scheme that would make him a fortune in two years … But he'd never have time to carry it out, even if he applied himself to defrauding the company day and night. Twenty-two directors before him had tried to make a fortune, each with his own system, like at roulette. All this was well known to the stockholders, who were keeping an eye on him from up above, still higher up, from the Rue Moncey in Paris. The Director made them laugh. How childish! The stockholders were the biggest bandits of all, they knew their Director was syphilitic and much too horny for the tropics, they knew he downed enough quinine and bismuth to burst his eardrums and enough arsenic to make his gums drop out.

In the Company's bookkeeping the Director's months were numbered, numbered like the months of a pig's

life.

My little colleagues never exchanged ideas. Only set formulas, baked and rebaked like dry crusts of thought. “Worry won’t get us anywhere!” they said. “Never say die! …” “The Director’s a jerk! …” “Nigger skin is good for tanning!” *etc.* In the evening after work we’d meet for *apéritifs* with an “assistant manager,” a Monsieur Tandernot from La Rochelle. If Tandernot hobnobbed with the traders, it was only because they’d pay for his drinks. He was a pitiful case, stone broke. His position in the colonial hierarchy was the lowest possible, overseeing road construction in the middle of the jungle. His militiamen had clubs, and naturally the natives worked. But since no white man ever used the new roads that Tandernot built, and since the blacks preferred their own tracks through the jungle where it was harder to lay hands on them for tax purposes, and since Tandernot’s government roads didn’t actually go anywhere, they soon vanished under a dense growth of vegetation, from month to month if the truth be known.

“Believe it or not,” that astonishing pioneer would say, “last year I lost a hundred and twenty-two kilometers of them.”

During my stay, I only heard Tandernot boast about one thing, the one achievement he was humbly vain about: he was the only European capable of catching cold in Bragamance with the thermometer at a hundred and ten in the shade … That one distinction consoled him for many sorrows. “I’ve caught another rotten cold!” he’d announce proudly over his *apéritif*.

“You don’t see that happening to anyone else!” And other members of our sickly group would cry out: “Good old Tandernot! What a man!” This little satisfaction was better than nothing. Where vanity is at stake, anything is better than nothing.

Another way the Company’s petty clerks amused themselves was putting on fever contests. It wasn’t difficult. These matches could go on for days, and they whiled away the time. When evening came and, almost always, the fever with it, they’d take their temperatures.

“Hey, I’ve got a hundred and one!” … “Hell, that’s nothing. I can work up a hundred and three any time I feel like it!”

These readings were absolutely accurate and above board. By the light of hurricane lamps they’d compare thermometers. The winner would tremble and gloat. “I’m sweating so much I can’t piss,” said the most emaciated of the lot, a skinny young fellow from the Pyrenees, a champion of febrility who had come to Bragamance, so he told me, to get away from a seminary where he hadn’t enough freedom. But time was passing, and none of my companions could tell me exactly what species of freak the man I was replacing in Bikomimbo belonged to.

“He’s funny!” they told me, and that was all.

“When you start out in a job like that,” said the little Pyrenean with the high fever, “you’ve got to show what you’re good for! It’s all one way or the other. As far as the Director’s concerned, you’ll either be solid gold or solid shit! And another thing. He’ll judge you right away.”

I was very much afraid of being put down as “solid shit” or worse. These young slave drivers, my friends, took me to see another employee of the Pordurière, who deserves special mention. He operated a store in the European quarter. Moldering with fatigue, oily and decrepit, he dreaded the slightest ray of light because of his eyes, which two years of uninterrupted baking under a tin roof, had dried out atrociously. It took him a good half hour every morning to open them, so he told me, and another half hour before he could see more or less clearly. Every ray of light was torture. A big mangy mole. Suffocation and suffering had become second nature with him, and so had thieving. If he’d suddenly woken up healthy and honest, it would really have thrown him off balance. Even today, at this distance, I’d call his hatred for the Director General one of the most violent passions it has ever been given me to observe. At the thought of the Director, a violent rage would make him forget the pain he was in, and on the slightest pretext he’d rant and rave, all the while scratching himself from top to toe.

He never stopped scratching, in ellipses so to speak, from the lower end of his spinal column to the top of his neck. He dug furrows into his epidermis and dermis with his bloody fingernails, while continuing to wait on his numerous customers, most of them virtually naked blacks.

With his free hand he would plunge busily into various repositories to the right and left of him in the dark shop. Without ever making a mistake, deft and admirably quick, he would take out exactly what the customer wanted, stinking leaf tobacco, damp matches, cans of sardines, a ladleful of molasses, super-alcoholic beer in phony bottles, which he’d suddenly drop if overcome by the desire to scratch in the cavernous depths of his

trousers. Then he would thrust in his whole arm, and it would emerge through the fly, which he always left partly open as a precaution.

He referred to the ailment that was eating away his skin by its local name, “corocoro.”

“This miserable corocoro! When I think that the stinking Director hasn’t caught it yet, it makes me itch a hundred times worse! The corocoro can’t get a hold on him! … He’s too rotten already. That pimp isn’t a man. He’s a smell! … Pure unadulterated shit!” When he said that, we’d all burst out laughing, the black customers too, in emulation. He frightened us a little. But he had one friend, a wheezing, graying little fellow who drove a truck for the Pordurière. He used to bring us ice that he’d stolen here and there from ships tied up at the wharf.

We’d drink his health at the bar, surrounded by the black customers, who looked on enviously. These customers were the more sophisticated blacks, who’d lost their fear of doing business with white men, a kind of elite so to speak. The other blacks, not so smart, preferred to keep their distance. Matter of instinct. But the most enterprising, the most contaminated of the blacks got taken on as clerks in the store. You could recognize the black clerks by the way they cursed and yelled at other blacks. My colleague with the corocoro traded in crude rubber, it came in sticky balls that the natives would bring in from the bush in big sacks.

While we were in the store, listening to him by the hour, a family of rubber gatherers came to the door and froze with timidity, the father in the lead, wrinkled, girt in a skimpy orange loincloth and holding his long machete.

The savage was afraid to come in despite the encouragements of one of the native clerks:

“C’mon in, nigger! Come look see! We no eat savages!” Won over by these kind words, they stepped into the sweltering shack, at the back of which our corocoro man was ranting. Apparently that native had never seen a store or possibly even a white man before. One of the women, with a big basket of crude rubber balanced on her head, followed him with downcast eyes.

Quickly the recruiting clerks grabbed her basket and put the contents on the scales. The savage didn’t know what the scales were about or anything else. His wife was still afraid to raise her head. The rest of the family waited outside. The clerk told them to come in, too bad if they missed the show.

That was the first time they had all trekked in from the bush to the white man’s town. It must have taken them a good long time to collect all that rubber. So naturally they were interested in the outcome. You hang little cups on the trunks of the trees, and the rubber oozes into them very very slowly. Sometimes you don’t get so much as a small glassful in two months.

After the weighing, our scratcher dragged the bewildered native behind the counter, did a little reckoning with a pencil stub, and shoved a few coins into the man’s hand. Then he said: “Beat it! That’s it!”

All his little white friends were convulsed to see how cleverly he had handled the transaction. The black man stood there by the counter, looking lost in his skimpy orange underdrawers.

One of the black clerks yelled at him to wake him up: “You no savvy money? You savage?” This clerk knew his onions, he was used to these peremptory transactions, he had probably been trained. “You no speakie French?” he went on. “You missing link, eh? … What you speakum anyway? Couscous? Mabillia? Jackass! Bushman! You heap big jackass!”

The savage just stood there with his hand closed on his coins. He would have run away if he had dared, but he didn’t dare.

“What you buy with dough?” the scratcher put in. “I haven’t seen such a jughead in a long time! He must have come a long way,?What you wait for? Gimme that dough!” He grabbed the money, and in place of the coins gave the black man a bright green handkerchief that he had deftly spirited from some secret hiding place under the counter. When the black man hesitated to leave with the handkerchief, the scratcher went a step further. He certainly knew all the tricks of the conqueror’s trade. Shaking the big square of muslin before the eyes of a wee black child, he said: “Ain’t it pretty, you little turd? Did you ever see one like it, little sweetie, little stinkpot, little fart?” And one-two-three he tied it around the child’s neck. Now the child was dressed.

The whole family stared at the child, decked out in the green cotton object … There was nothing more they could do, because the handkerchief had come into the family. They could only accept it, take it, and go.

They all backed slowly out. They crossed the threshold. When the father, who was last, turned around to say

something, the sharpest of the clerks, who was wearing shoes, helped him leave with a swift kick in the ass.

The entire little tribe stood silently on the other side of the Avenue Faidherbe, under the magnolia tree, watching us finish our *apéritifs*. It looked as if they were trying to understand what had happened to them.

The corocoro man was treating us. He even played his phonograph for us. You could find anything in his store. It made me think of the supply depots in the war.

9

As I've told you, there were lots of blacks and small whites like myself working in the warehouses and plantations of the Compagnie Porduriere du Petit Togo at the same time as me. The natives, by and large, had to be driven to work with clubs, they preserved that much dignity, whereas the whites, perfected by public education, worked of their own free will.

Wielding a club is fatiguing in the long run. The white men's hearts and minds, on the other hand, have been crammed full of the hope of becoming rich and powerful, and that costs nothing, absolutely nothing. We've heard enough about Egypt and the Tatar tyrants! In the art of squeezing the last ounce of labor out of a two-legged animal, those primitive ancients were pretentious incompetents! Did they ever think of calling their slave "Monsieur" or letting him vote now and then, or giving him his newspaper? And especially had they thought of sending him to war to work off his passions? After twenty centuries of Christianity (as I personally can bear witness) your modern man simply can't control himself when a regiment passes before his eyes. It puts too many ideas into his head. Accordingly, I decided to keep a close watch on myself from then on and learn to keep my mouth scrupulously shut, to conceal my longing to get away, in short, to prosper if possible and come what may, in the service of the Compagnie Porduriere. Not a moment to lose. Alongside our warehouses, on the muddy river banks, whole nests of crocodiles, insidious and unmoving, lurked in wait. Built of metal, they enjoyed the delirious heat, and so apparently did the blacks.

At midday you couldn't help wondering if all this bustle of toiling masses, this hubbub of screeching, overexcited blacks on the docks was possible.

To learn the secret of numbering sacks before taking to the bush, I had to submit to gradual asphyxiation in the Company's main warehouse along with the other clerks, between two scales wedged into the alkaline crowd of ragged, pustulous, singing black men. Each one of them drew a little cloud behind him and shook it in cadence. The dull thuds of the overseers' clubs descended on their magnificent backs without provoking the least complaint or protest. Dazed and passive, they suffered pain as unquestioningly as the torrid air of that dusty furnace.

The Director came by from time to time, always aggressive, to make sure I was mastering the techniques of numbering sacks and falsifying weights.

With sweeping blows of his club he cleared his path to the scales through the press of natives. "Bardamu," he said to me one morning when he was in high spirits. "You see these niggers all around us? … Well, when I came to Little Togo almost thirty years ago, those loafers still lived by hunting, fishing, and intertribal massacres! … I was a small trader then … Well, as true as I'm standing here, I'd seen them coming home to their village after a victory, loaded with more than a hundred baskets of bleeding human flesh to stuff their bellies with! … Hear that, Bardamu? … Bleeding! … Their enemies! A feast! … Today, no more victories! We've accomplished that much! … No more tribes! … No more flimflam and foolishness! Today we've got a labor force and peanuts! Good hard work! No more hunting! No more guns! Peanuts and rubber! … To pay taxes with! Taxes to get us more rubber and peanuts! This is life, Bardamu! Peanuts! Peanuts and rubber! … And say … Well, I'll be damned. There's General Tombat!"

True enough, he was coming our way, an old man crumpling under the enormous weight of the sun.

The general wasn't exactly a soldier anymore, but he wasn't exactly a civilian either. Confidential agent of the Porduriere, he took care of liaison between the Administration and the business community, an indispensable function although the two lived in a state of permanent competition and hostility. But the general was a shrewd maneuverer. For instance, he had disentangled a shady deal in enemy holdings, which had been judged inextricable in high places.

At the beginning of the war General Tombat's ear had been split, not very badly, just enough to get him honorably retired after Charleroi. He had immediately offered his services to "Greater France." But long after Verdun, that epic battle was still on his mind. He was always shuffling a handful of telegrams. "Our little poilus will hold on! They are holding on!" It was so hot in the warehouse and France was so far away that we could have done without General Tombat's predictions. But just to be polite we all, and the Director with us, declared in chorus: "They're marvelous!" On these words Tombat left us. A few moments later the Director opened up another violent path through the tightly packed torsos and vanished in his turn into the peppery dust.

The Director had eyes like glowing coals, he was consumed with a passion to hornswoggle the Company. He frightened me a little, and I had difficulty in getting used to his presence. I found it hard to believe that in all

the world there could be a human carcass capable of such maximum-tension greed. He seldom said anything to us straight out, he spoke only in muffled hints, and he seemed to live and breathe for the sole purpose of conspiring, spying, and betraying. I was told that he stole, swindled, and peculated incomparably more than all the other officials put together, and they were no slouches, I assure you. But I can easily believe it.

During my stay in Fort-Gono, I had a little leisure in which to roam around. The only really desirable spot I came across in the whole town was the hospital.

Whenever you get to a new place, certain ambitions turn up inside you. My ambition was to be sick, just plain sick. Every man to his taste. I walked around those promising hospital pavilions, so doleful, withdrawn, and unmolested, and I never relinquished their antiseptic charm without regret. The lawns around them were brightened by furtive little birds and anxious multicolored lizards. An earthly Paradise in its way.

As for the blacks, one soon gets used to them, their sluggish good nature, their slow gestures, and the protuberant bellies of their women. Those blacks stink of their misery, their interminable vanities, and their repugnant resignation; actually, they're just like our poor people, except they have more children, less dirty washing, and less red wine. When I'd finished inhaling and sniffing at the hospital, I followed the native crowd and stopped for a while outside the pagodalike edifice near the fort that a restaurant owner had built for the entertainment of the sexy young jokers of the colony.

The prosperous whites of Fort-Gono went there at night and gambled doggedly, meanwhile drinking and yawning and belching with a will. For two hundred francs you could lay the luscious *patronne*. The young jokers had a lot of trouble with their trousers when they wanted to scratch, because their suspenders kept sliding off.

At night big crowds poured out of the native huts and collected around the pagoda, never weary of seeing and hearing the whites jigging around the mechanical piano as off-key waltzes wheezed from its moth-eaten strings. When she heard the music, a blissful look came over the *patronne*, meaning that she felt like dancing.

After trying in vain for several days, I managed to have a few talks with her in private. Her periods, she confided, lasted no less than three weeks. Fault of the tropics. In addition, her customers wore her out. Not that they made love very often, but since drinks at the pagoda were on the expensive side, they tried to get their money's worth by pinching her ass something terrible before leaving. That was what wore her out mostly. As a competent businesswoman, the *patronne* knew all the gossip of the colony, all the desperate love affairs that transpired between the fever-harried officers and the handful of civil servants' wives, they too menstruating interminably and languishing for days on end in the deep reclining chairs of their verandas.

The streets, offices, and shops of Fort-Gono were awash with mutilated desires. To do everything people did in Europe despite the abominable temperature and their own progressive, insurmountable decay seemed to be the prime obsession, satisfaction, and grimace of those maniacs.

The fences could hardly contain the swollen, wildly aggressive vegetation of the gardens; the rampant foliage molded delirious lettuces around the houses, those chunks of dried-out egg white, in which some jaundiced European was rotting away. All along the Avenue Fachoda, the liveliest and most fashionable street in Fort-Gono, there were as many overflowing salad bowls as Government officials.

Every night I went to my no doubt unfinished shack, where my skeleton of a bed had been put up by my depraved boy. He set traps for me, he was as sensual as a cat, he wanted to become part of my family. I, however, was haunted by other, far more pressing preoccupations, especially by my plan to take refuge for a while in the hospital, the only armistice within my reach in that torrid carnival.

In peace as in war, I took no interest at all in futile pastimes.

Even the sincerely and eminently obscene offers that came to me through the boss's cook struck me as colorless.

For the last time I made the rounds of my young friends at the Porduriere, trying to cull some information about that disloyal employee, the one I had orders to replace at all costs in the bush. Empty chit-chat.

Nor did I learn anything substantial in the Café Faidherbe at the end of the Avenue Fachoda, abuzz at the twilight hour with hundreds of slanders, rumors, and calumnies. Nothing but impressions. Whole dustbins full of impressions were overturned in that halflight encrusted with multicolored lamps. Shaking the lace of the giant palm trees, the wind blew clouds of mosquitoes into the customers' saucers. The Governor, thanks to his exalted rank, figured prominently in the discourse round about. His inexpiable crumminess was the mainstay of the *apéritif* conversation in which the nauseated colonial liver seeks relief before dinner.

At that hour all the cars in Fort-Gono, ten in all, drove back and forth past the cafe. They never seemed to go very far. The Place Faidherbe had the characteristic atmosphere, the overdone décor, the floral and verbal excess, of a subprefecture in southern France gone mad. The ten cars left the Place Faidherbe only to come back five minutes later, having once more completed the same circuit with their cargo of anemic Europeans, dressed in unbleached linen, fragile creatures as wobbly as melting sherbet.

For weeks and years these colonials passed the same forms and faces until they were so sick of hating them that they didn't even look at one another. The officers now and then would take their families for a walk, paying close attention to military salutes and civilian greetings, the wives swaddled in their special sanitary napkins, the children, unbearably plump European maggots, wilted by the heat and constant diarrhea.

To command you need more than a kepi; you also need troops. In the climate of Fort-Gono the European cadres melted faster than butter. A battalion was like a lump of sugar in your coffee; the longer you looked the less you saw. Most of the white conscripts were permanently in the hospital, sleeping off their malaria, riddled with parasites made to order for every nook and cranny in the body, whole squads stretched out flat between cigarettes and flies, masturbating under moldy sheets, spinning endless yarns between fits of painstakingly provoked and coddled fever. Poor bastards, they were having a rough time, a pitiful crew in the soft halflight of the green shutters, re-enlisted men soon fallen from celebrity, side by side?the hospital was mixed?with civilians, all hunted men in flight from the bosses and the bush.

In the apathy of those long malarial siestas, the heat is such that the flies also rest. From bloodless, hairy arms on both sides of the beds dangle grimy books, all in tatters. Half the pages are missing because of the dysentery cases, who never have enough paper, and also because of the sourpuss nuns, who have their own way of censoring wicked books. The military crabs victimize the nuns as much as everybody else. When they want a good scratch, they lift up their habits behind the screen where this morning's stiff is still so hot that he hasn't yet managed to grow cold.

Depressing as the hospital was, it was the only place in the whole colony where you could feel forgotten, safe from the people outside, the bosses. A vacation from slavery, that was the main thing, anyway the only happiness within my reach.

I made inquiries about the requirements for admission, the habits and idiosyncracies of the doctors. By that time the prospect of leaving for the bush filled me with despair and thoughts of revolt; already I was planning to contract every available fever as soon as possible, to return to Fort-Gono desperately ill and so emaciated, so repulsive that they'd not only have to take me, but also to ship me back to France. I already knew some wonderful tricks for getting sick, and I was learning special new ones for the colonies, I prepared to overcome a thousand difficulties, for neither the directors of the Compagnie Pordurière nor the military authorities were easily discouraged from tracking their chillracked, cadaverous prey and pouncing on them as they played cards between the pissy beds.

They would find me resolved to rot with whatever disease proved necessary. Unfortunately you didn't usually stay in the hospital for long, unless you wrote finis there to your colonial career once and for all. Sometimes the toughest and smartest of the fever patients, those with the greatest strength of character, managed to slip aboard a transport bound for France. That was a happy miracle. Most of the hospital patients gave up, recognized that the regulations had defeated them, and went back to the bush to lose what weight they had left. If the quinine relinquished them to their maggots while they were still in the hospital, the chaplain would simply close their eyes at about six in the evening, and four Senegalese would carry the bloodless husks to the plot of red clay beside the church in Fort-Gono. That church, incidentally, was so hot under its tin roof that you never went there twice, more tropical than the tropics. To stand up in that church you'd have to pant like a dog. That's the way it goes. You can't deny it, men have a hard time doing all that's demanded of them: butterflies in their youth, maggots at the end.

I tried here and there to get a little more information, a few facts to go by. Because what the Director had told me about Bikomimbo seemed incredible. Apparently the place was an experimental trading post, an attempt to penetrate the bush, at least ten days' journey from the coast, isolated in the midst of the natives and their jungle, which had been described to me as an enormous reservation, crawling with animals and diseases.

I wondered if my young friends at the Pordurière, who oscillated between aggressiveness and extreme depression, weren't simply jealous of me. Their idiocy (which is all they could call their own) varied with the amount of liquor they had ingested, the letters they had received, and the amount of hope they had lost during the day. As a general rule, the more moribund they felt, the more they swaggered and strutted. If they'd been ghosts (like Ortolan at the front) their gall would have known no bounds.

Our *apéritifs* went on for three whole hours. We always talked about the Governor, the pivot of all our

conversations; then we talked about possible and impossible swindles, and lastly about sex: the three colors of the colonial flag. The civil servants present made no bones about accusing the military of wallowing in peculation and abuse of authority, but the military paid them back in kind. The traders, for their part, regarded all these prebendaries as hypocritical imposters and bandits. A rumor that the Governor was being recalled had been in circulation every morning for the past ten years, yet the delightful telegram announcing his disgrace never arrived, and this in spite of the at least two anonymous letters mailed to the Minister for the Colonies each week, imputing a thousand meticulously described atrocities to that local tyrant.

The blacks are lucky with their onion skins; the white man, encased between his acid sweat and his tropical shirt, poisons himself. It's not safe to go near him, I'd learned my lesson on board the *Admiral Bragueton*.

In only a few days I heard some sweet stories about my Director! His past was as full of low dodges as a prison in a seaport town. His past had just about everything in it, including, I imagine, some magnificent miscarriages of justice. True, his looks were against him, his face had the terrifying look of an undeniable murderer, or rather, to be fair, the look of a reckless man in a terrible hurry to get ahead?which amounts to the same thing. If you passed by at siesta time, you might see, sprawled in the shade of their houses on the Boulevard Faidherbe, a few white women, the wives of officers or settlers, who were even more devastated by the climate than the men, frail creatures with pleasingly hesitant voices, infinitely indulgent smiles, their pallor coated with rouge, as though happy on their deathbeds. These transplanted middle-class women showed less courage and pride of bearing than the *patronne* of the Pagoda, who had no one but herself to lean on. The Compagnie Pordurière consumed quantities of small clerks like me, every year it lost dozens of these subhumans in the jungle trading posts not far from the swamps. Pioneers!

Every morning the Army and Business came to the office of the hospital, whimpering and begging for their men. Not a day went by but some captain came threatening and calling down God's thunders on the Head Physician to make him send those three malarial cardplaying sergeants, and two syphilitic corporals back to their units on the double, because how could he put a company together without noncoms? If told that his gold-bricks were dead, he'd stop bothering the hospital management and go back to the Pagoda for a few more drinks.

Men, days, things?they passed before you knew it in this hotbed of vegetation, heat, humidity, and mosquitoes. Everything passed, disgustingly, in little pieces, in phrases, particles of flesh and bone, in regrets and corpuscles; demolished by the sun, they melted away in a torrent of light and colors, and taste and time went with them, everything went. Nothing remained but shimmering dread.

At last the freighter, which was to take me along the coast to the vicinity of my trading post, anchored within sight of Fort-Gono. The *Papaoutah* was her name. A small ship, woodburning and flat-bottomed, built for estuaries. I was the only white on board, and they assigned me a small space between the kitchen and the toilet. We moved so slowly that at first I thought we were being cautious in getting out of the roadstead. But we never went any faster. This *Papaoutah* was incredibly short on power. We edged along within sight of the coast, an endless gray line tufted with small trees in the dancing heat mists. What a trip!

The *Papaoutah* plowed through the water as slowly and painfully as if she herself had sweated it all. She would undo one little wave after another as cautiously as if they'd been bandages. The pilot, it seemed to me from a distance, must have been a mulatto; I say

"seemed" because I never summoned up the energy to go up on the bridge and see for myself. Until about five o'clock I stayed in the shaded gangway, wedged in among the blacks who were the only passengers. If you don't want the sun to burn your brains through your eyes, you have to blink like a rat. After five you can indulge in a look around?

the good life. That gray fringe, that tufted country at the water's edge, looked like flattened dress shields and didn't appeal to me at all. The air was unbreathable, even at night it was hot, sultry, and salty. Everything was so cloying it raised my bile, what with the smell of the engine and in the daytime the water that was too brown on one side and too blue on the other. This was even worse than the *Admiral Bragueton*, minus of course the murderous officers.

At last we approached the port of my destination. Its name, I was told, was Topo. After coughing, spitting, and quaking on the surface of that oily dishwater for three times as long as it takes to eat four canned meals, the *Papaoutah* finally pulled up at the landing. Three enormous thatched huts stood out from the shaggy banks. From a distance and at first glance the place was rather attractive. This, I was told, was the mouth of a big sandy river, which I was to mount by canoe on my way to the heart of the jungle. I was scheduled to spend only a few days here at Topo by the sea, just time enough to frame my last colonial resolutions.

We headed for a flimsy dock, and before reaching it the *Papaoutah* scraped a sand bar with its fat belly. Well I remember that dock, it was made of bamboo, a story in itself. They told me it had to be rebuilt every month, because of the tricky, nimble little mollusks that came by the thousands and ate it up. This endless rebuilding, in fact, was one of the heartbreaking occupations that weighed on Lieutenant Grappa, Commander of the Topo station and the surrounding territory. The *Papaoutah* called only once a month, but a month was all the mollusks needed to eat up her dock.

As soon as I landed, Lieutenant Grappa took possession of my papers, checked them for authenticity, copied them into a virgin register, and invited me in for an *apéritif*. I was the first traveler, he informed me, to come to Topo in two years. Nobody came to Topo. There was no reason to come to Topo. Sergeant Alcide was Lieutenant Grappa's second in command. In their isolation there was no love lost between them. "I always have to watch that subordinate of mine," said Lieutenant Grappa at our first meeting, "or he tends to get too familiar."

Since any happenings they might have imagined in that wilderness would have been too implausible (for what could happen in such a place?), Sergeant Alcide prepared in advance a whole sheaf of "Nothing to report" reports, which Grappa signed without delay, and the *Papaoutah* carried them away to the Governor General.

Among the lagoons round about and in the depths of the jungle several moth-eaten tribes lived in misery and stagnation, decimated and befuddled by trypanosoma and chronic poverty; even so, these tribes paid a small tax, collected of course with clubs. From among their younger set a few militiamen were recruited to wield these same clubs. The militia consisted of twelve men.

Lucky bastards! I know whereof I speak. I knew them well. Lieutenant Grappa equipped them in his own way and fed them regulation rice. One rifle for all twelve, but each had his own little flag. No shoes. But, since all things are relative and comparative in this world, the native recruits thought Grappa was treating them splendidly. Every day, in fact, he turned away volunteers and enthusiasts, young men who had had their fill of the bush. The hunt in these parts didn't yield much, and at least one grandmother a week was eaten for want of gazelles. At seven o'clock every morning Alcide's militiamen reported for drill. Since I lived in one corner of his hut, where he had made room for me, I had a ringside seat for the fantasia. Never has any army in the world had more willing soldiers. In response to Alcide's commands, those primitives would wear themselves out pacing the sand in columns of four, eight, and finally twelve, imagining they had packs, shoes, and even bayonets, and better still, going through the motions of using them. Barely emerged from a nature so vigorous and so close at hand, they wore nothing but an apology for khaki shorts. They had to imagine all the rest, and did. At Alcide's peremptory command, these ingenious warriors deposited their imaginary packs on the ground and lunged into empty space to disembowel illusory enemies with illusory bayonets. Then, after simulating the unbuttoning of jackets, they would stack invisible rifles and in response to another sign, fling themselves with unfeigned passion into an abstraction of rifle drill. To see them disperse, gesticulating with studied precision, and lose themselves in intricate, epileptic, and insanely useless movements was deeply depressing. Especially when you remember that in Topo the raw, stiffling heat, so perfectly concentrated in that sand pit between the conjugated polished mirrors of the sea and the river, would have made you swear by your bleeding buttocks that you were being forced to sit on a chunk of sun that had just fallen off. But these implacable conditions didn't stop Alcide from sounding off. Not at all. Passing over the heads of his incredible drill squad, his roars mounted to the tops of the venerable cedars at the edge of the jungle. And the thunder of his "Ten-shun!" reverberated still further, further still.

Meanwhile Lieutenant Grappa was administering justice. We'll have more to say about that. Or from a distance, from the shade of his hut, he'd be supervising the ephemeral construction of his ill-fated dock. He had ordered complete uniforms and equipment for his recruits, and every time the *Papaoutah* showed up, he went down to the dock with sceptical optimism to take delivery. For two years he'd been clamoring for those uniforms. It may have been especially humiliating for Grappa as a Corsican to see that his militiamen were still stark naked.

In our hut, Alcide's I mean, a small, semiclandestine trade was carried on in small objects and miscellaneous odds and ends. As a matter of fact, all the commerce of Topo passed through Alcide's hands, for he and he alone possessed a small stock of tobacco, both packaged and in the leaf, several liters of brandy, and a few bolts of cotton goods. It was plain that the twelve militiamen felt a real liking for Alcide though he chewed them out interminably and kicked their rear ends rather unjustly. But those nudist soldiers had discerned in Alcide the unquestionable signs of kinship, of fellow membership in the great family of the innately, incurably poor. Black or not, tobacco created a tie, it always does. I had brought a few newspapers with me from Europe. Alcide looked through them, trying to take an interest in the news, but though he tried three times to fix his attention on those ill-assorted columns, he couldn't get through them. "You know," he confessed to me after his vain effort, "I don't really give a shit about the news anymore! I've been here for three years now!" It shouldn't be thought that Alcide was trying to impress me by playing the hermit. Actually, the ruthlessness,

the manifest indifference of the whole world where he was concerned, had driven him, in his capacity as a re-enlisted sergeant, to regard the whole world outside of Topo as a distant planet.

Alcide was a good sort, obliging, generous and all. I realized that later, a little too late. He was crushed by his enormous resignation, that basic quality that makes it as easy to kill poor bastards in and out of the army as to let them live. Poor people never, or hardly ever, ask for an explanation of all they have to put up with. They hate one another, and content themselves with that.

Around our hut, scattered over the lagoon of torrid pitiless sand, there were strange little flowers, fresh and short-lived, green, pink, or purple, the kind that in Europe you only see painted on certain pieces of porcelain, a kind of primitive no-nonsense morning glory. Closed on their stems, they endured the long abominable days, then opened in the evening and trembled in the first balmy breezes.

One day when Alcide saw me picking a little bunch of them, he warned me: “Pick them if you want to, but don’t water the little bitches, it kills them … They’re delicate, not at all like the sunflowers we used to grow for the army kids in Rambouillet! … You could piss on them! … They’d drink anything! … If you ask me, flowers are like men … The bigger the dumber!” That was an obvious dig at Lieutenant Grappa, whose body was bulky and ramshackle, his hands short, purple, and terrifying. The kind of hands that would never understand anything. And indeed, Grappa made no attempt to understand. I stayed in Topo for two weeks, during which I shared not only Alcide’s existence and food, his bed fleas and sand fleas (two species), but also his quinine and the inexorably tepid and diarrheic water of the nearby well.

One day when Lieutenant Grappa was feeling convivial he invited me to his house for coffee. Grappa was jealous, he never let anyone see his native concubine. Consequently, he picked a day when his Negress was visiting her parents in their village. It was also the day when his court of justice convened, and he wanted to impress me.

The motley mass of complainants and screeching witnesses had arrived early in the morning. In bright-colored loincloths they crowded around the hut. Defendants and mere public stood mixed helter-skelter, all smelling strongly of garlic, sandalwood, rancid butter, and saffron-scented sweat. Like Alcide’s militiamen, all these people seemed intent first and foremost on frenzied illusory motion; in transports of imaginary argument, they spewed castanet language and shook their clenched fists.

Deep in his creaking, groaning cane chair, Lieutenant Grappa smiled at all this assembled incoherence. He trusted for guidance in the post interpreter, who in a loud and barely intelligible mumbo-jumbo communicated unbelievable complaints.

Take, for instance, the one-eyed sheep that a certain girl’s parents refused to return despite the fact that their daughter, though married in due form, had never been delivered to her husband, because in the meantime the bride’s brother had somehow seen fit to murder the bridegroom’s sister, who had been guarding the sheep at the time. And many similar but even more complicated grievances.

Around us a hundred faces, impassioned by these questions of custom and interest, bared their teeth with little clicking or big gurgling sounds, black-African words. The heat was nearing its height. I looked up past the edge of the roof to see if some disaster was approaching in the sky. Not even a storm.

“I’m going to straighten this whole thing out immediately!”’ Grappa finally declared; the heat and interminable palavers had driven him to a decision. “Where’s the bride’s father?

Bring him here!”

“Here he is!” cried a dozen natives, pushing an elderly, decrepit-looking black man swathed with great dignity in a yellow pagne?Roman style?to the front. With one clenched fist the old man beat time to everything that was being said around him. He didn’t look as if he’d come to make a complaint, more likely he hoped for a bit of entertainment long after he’d given up expecting any tangible results from his lawsuit.

“All right,” said Grappa. “Twenty strokes! Let’s get this over with! Give this old pimp twenty strokes! That’ll teach him to pester me every Thursday for the last two months with his batty sheep story!”

The old man saw four husky militiamen coming toward him. At first he didn’t understand what they wanted with him, but then he began to roll his eyes, which were bloodshot like the eyes of a terrified old animal that has never been beaten before. He made no real attempt to resist, but neither did he know what position to take so the scourge of justice would inflict the least pain.

The militiamen pulled him by the toga. Two of them wanted him to kneel, but the other two told him to lie

prone. In the end, they just laid him out on the ground any which way, lifted up his toga, and subjected his back and buttocks to a score of blows with a flexible rod that would have made a healthy mule bellow for a week. He wriggled and writhed, the fine sand spurted all around him mixed with blood, he spat sand as he howled, he made me think of an enormous pregnant basset bitch being tortured.

The public was silent while this was going on. All you could hear was the sound of the beating. When it was over, the old man, though half unconscious, tried to get up and cover himself with his Roman pagne. His mouth and nose and most of all his back were bleeding profusely. Droning their comments and chit-chat in funereal tones, the crowd led him away. Lieutenant Grappa relit his cigar. In my presence, he affected an air of aloofness from these things. I don't believe he was more Neronian than anyone else, but he disliked being obliged to think. That infuriated him. What exasperated him when performing his judicial functions was the questions he was asked.

The same day we witnessed another two memorable thrashings pursuant to further disconcerting reports of dowries taken back, poisonings threatened … promises unfulfilled … children of uncertain origin, *etc.*

"Oh!" Grappa cried. "If they only knew how completely cold their bickerings leave me, they'd stay in their jungle where they belong instead of chewing my ear off with their cock and bull stories! Do I bother them with my troubles?" But then he started on a different idea: "You know, I'm almost beginning to think those apes are developing a taste for my justice … For two years I've been trying to get them disgusted with it, but every Thursday they come back for more … Believe it or not, young man, it's almost always the same ones who keep coming! … A bunch of perverts if you ask me!"

Then the conversation turned to Toulouse, where he spent all his leaves and where he was planning to settle in six years when he retired. It was all right with me. We had pleasantly arrived at the Calvados stage when we were disturbed again by a native who'd been sentenced the week before but was late in having his sentence carried out. Now, two hours after everyone else, he'd come of his own free will to get his thrashing. He'd been on the trail for two days and two nights, and he had no intention of going back to his village with his business undone. But he was late, and in matters of penal punctuality Grappa was uncompromising: "He asked for it! Why didn't he wait his turn last time? … I sentenced the motherfucker to those fifty strokes last Thursday, not today!"

Still, the client protested, for he had a good excuse; he'd had to hurry back to his village to bury his mother. He had three or four mothers all to himself. Excellent arguments! …

"It will have to wait till the next session!"

But our client would barely have time for the trip to his village and back before the following Thursday. He went on protesting, he wouldn't budge. It took several violent kicks in the ass to get that masochist out of the camp. They gave him some pleasure, but not enough … In the end he went to Alcide, who took advantage of the situation to sell him a whole assortment of tobacco, in the leaf, in packages, and in the form of snuff. Well entertained by these various incidents, I took my leave of Grappa. It was time for his siesta, and he withdrew to the interior of his hut, where his native housekeeper, who had just come back from her village, was already reclining. That black woman had a magnificent pair of tits, and she had been well schooled by the Sisters in Gabon. Not only did the young lady speak French (with a lisp), she also knew how to administer quinine in jam and to dig chiggers out of the soles of one's feet. She knew a hundred ways of making herself agreeable to a white man without tiring him or by tiring him, whichever he preferred.

Alcide was waiting for me. He was rather miffed. It was probably the invitation with which Grappa had honored me that decided him to confide in me. What he told me was pretty strong stuff. Unasked, he modeled Grappa's portrait in steaming cow flop. I replied that he had taken the words out of my mouth. Alcide's vulnerable point was that in defiance of army regulations, which strictly forbade it, he was trading with the natives in the jungle round about and with his twelve militiamen as well. He mercilessly sold those people tobacco on credit. When payday came around, there was no pay for the militiamen to collect, they had smoked it all up. They smoked up advances. This petty irregularity, what with the rarity of cash in the region, hampered the collection of taxes. Lieutenant Grappa was too cautious a man to provoke a scandal in Topo while he was in command, but he was definitely pissed off, maybe he was jealous. Understandably enough, he felt that whatever negligible sums of money the natives called their own should remain available to the tax collector. Each man to his taste and humble ambitions. At first this system of credit against their pay had seemed rather strange and even outrageous to the riflemen, whose sole purpose in working was to smoke Alcide's tobacco, but he had got them used to it by kicking them in the ass. By that time, they'd given up trying to collect their pay, they calmly smoked it up in advance, among the bright-colored flowers outside Alcide's hut, between two stints of imaginary drill. In short, there was room in Topo, small as it was, for two systems of civilization, Grappa's, which you might call Roman and which consisted of flogging your subjects

for the sole purpose of extracting tribute, of which, if Alcide was to be believed, Grappa retained a disgraceful percentage for his own strictly personal use, and the more elaborate Alcide system bearing witness to a higher stage of civilization, in which every soldier becomes a customer. This military-commercial complex is much more modern and hypocritical; it is, indeed, the basis of our own system.

Lieutenant Grappa was no great shakes at geography. For his knowledge of the vast territories committed to his charge, he relied on a few rudimentary maps that he had at the post. He was none too eager to know more about those territories. After all, we know what trees and the jungle are, we can see them very nicely from a distance. Tucked away in the fronds and hollows of that immense steam bath, a few thinly disseminated tribes stagnated amid their fleas and flies, stultified by their totems and unflaggingly gorging themselves with putrid manioc … Utterly na'ive, frankly cannibalistic, maddened by poverty, and ravaged by a thousand plagues. No earthly reason to go near them. Nothing to justify troublesome administrative incursions, which could yield no results whatsoever. When Grappa had finished meting out justice, he preferred to turn toward the sea and contemplate the horizon from which he had come one day and across which he would sail one day if all went well.

Familiar and all in all agreeable as the place had become to me, the time came when I had to think of leaving Topo for the post that was to be my dwelling place and occupation after several days of fluvial navigation and sylvan peregrinations.

Alcide and I were getting on fine together. We tried to fish for swordfish, a variety of shark that infested the waters in front of our hut. He was just as clumsy as I was. We never caught anything.

The only furnishings in his hut were his folding bed, mine, and a few crates, some empty, some full. I had the impression that what with his little business he must be putting quite a lot of money aside.

"Where do you keep it?" I asked him several times. "Where do you hide your filthy lucre?" Just to get his goat. "Planning a big spree when you get back?" I was only teasing him. Twenty times at least, as we dug into the inevitable canned tomatoes, I'd entertain him with amazing episodes of the heroic joyride from cathouse to cathouse that would celebrate his return to Bordeaux. He never said anything. He'd only laugh, as though my little stories amused him.

Apart from the drill and the court sessions, nothing happened in Topo, nothing whatever, so naturally, for want of other subjects, I'd take up the same old joke as often as possible. Once toward the end of my stay, I thought of writing to Monsieur Puta to touch him for some money. Alcide promised to mail my letter the next time the *Papaoutah* called. Alcide kept his writing materials in a small biscuit tin, just like the one Branledore had had, exactly the same. All re-enlisted sergeants seemed to have them. When he saw me start opening the box, Alcide made a movement to stop me. I was surprised and embarrassed. I had no idea why he wouldn't let me open it, but I put it down on the table. "Oh, all right, open it!" he said finally. "Hell, it doesn't matter." The photograph of a little girl was pasted to the inside of the lid. Just the head, a sweet little face with long curls, the way they wore them in those days. I took out pen and paper and quickly closed the lid. I was embarrassed at my indiscretion, but I also wondered why it had upset him so.

First I figured that the child must be his and he hadn't wanted to talk about her. I asked no questions, but then I heard him behind my back, trying to tell me something in a strange bumbling voice I'd never heard. I felt very uncomfortable. I knew I ought to help him tell me his story, but I didn't know how to go about it. I knew it would be a painful story to listen to, and I wasn't looking forward to it.

"It's nothing!" I finally heard him say. "It's my brother's daughter … They're both dead …" "Her parents?" "Yes, her parents …"

"Then who's bringing her up? Your mother?" I asked him that to show I was taking an interest. "My mother's dead too." "Who then?" "Well, me!" He grinned and blushed crimson, as if he'd done something absolutely indecent. Then he hastened to rectify:

"All right, I'll explain … I'm having her brought up in Bordeaux by the Sisters … But don't get me wrong, they're no Sisters of Charity … High-class Sisters … She's my responsibility and you needn't worry. She'll want for nothing! Her name is Ginette … Sweet little girl … Like her mother … She writes to me, she's making good progress, but you know, those schools are expensive … Especially now that she's ten … I want her to have piano lessons at the same time … What do you think of the piano? … Well, in my opinion the piano is the right thing for girls … Don't you agree? … And what about English? English can come in handy … Do you know English?"

As Alcide confessed his failing?not being generous enough? I began to look at him more closely, with his little

cosmetic mustache, his eccentric eyebrows, and his burnt-black skin. The delicacy of the man! And how he must have scrimped and saved on his meager wages … his pitiful allowances and tiny clandestine business … for months and years in this infernal Topo! … I didn't know what to say, I had no experience, but his heart was so much superior to mine that I went red in the face … Next to Alcide I was an impotent slob, boorish and vain … No two ways … Plain as day …

I didn't dare speak to him anymore. Suddenly I felt unworthy to say a word to him. I, who only yesterday had kept him at a distance and even looked down on him a little.

"I haven't been lucky," he went on, unaware that he was embarrassing me with his confidences. "Imagine, two years ago she had infantile paralysis … You know what infantile paralysis is?"

He went on to explain that the child's left leg was atrophied and that a specialist in Bordeaux was treating her with electricity.

"You think she'll get it back?" he asked me.

I assured him that she would recover completely with time and electricity. He spoke very circumspectly of his dead mother and of the child's infirmity. He was afraid, even at a distance, of harming her.

"Have you been to see her since her illness?"

"No, I've been here the whole time."

"Will you go and see her soon?"

"I don't think I'll be able to go for another three years … You see, I do a little business here … That's a big help to her … If I went on leave now, my place here would be taken before I got back … Especially with that bastard …"

So Alcide had asked to do a double hitch, to stay in Topo for six consecutive years instead of three, for the sake of his little niece, of whom he had nothing but a few letters and that little photograph.

"What bothers me," he said after we'd gone to bed, "is that she hasn't anybody for the holidays … That's hard on a little girl …"

Obviously Alcide was perfectly at ease, at home so to speak, in the higher regions, on terms of familiarity with the angels. You wouldn't have known it to look at him. With hardly a thought of what he was doing, he had consented to years of torture, to the crushing of his life in this torrid monotony for the sake of a little girl to whom he was vaguely related. Motivated by nothing but his good heart, he had set no conditions and asked nothing in return. To that little girl far away he was giving enough tenderness to make the whole world over, and he never showed it.

Suddenly he fell asleep in the candlelight. After a while I got up to look at his face. He slept like everybody else. He looked quite ordinary. There ought to be some mark by which to distinguish good people from bad.

10

There are two ways of getting into the jungle. One is to cut a tunnel through it, the way rats do in a bale of hay. That's the stifling way. I jibbed at that. Or you can endure the misery of sitting huddled in a hollow tree trunk, while they paddle you up the winding river from copse to snag, waiting for the endless days to pass and laying yourself open without defense to the deadly glare. And finally, dazed by the yapping of the black men, you reach your destination in some sort of condition.

At first your paddlers always need time to catch the cadence. Arguments. A paddle strikes the water, two or three rhythmic howls, the jungle sends back an answer, eddies, she's gliding, two paddles, three, still groping for the rhythm, waves, inarticulate burblings, a backward glance at the sea, flattening out as it recedes, and up ahead the long smooth expanse into which you're toiling. And for a while yet, far away on his dock, almost swallowed up by the sea mists, Alcide under his enormous bell-shaped pith helmet, a chunk of head, the face a small cheese, and below it the rest of him, floating in his tunic, lost in a strange white-trousered memory.

That's all I have left of the place, of Topo.

Have they managed to defend that scorching hamlet against the insidious scythe of the yellowish-brown river? Are its flea-bitten huts still standing? Are new Grappas and unknown Alcides still training new recruits in imaginary combat? Is the same plain-dealing brand of justice still being meted out? Is the drinking water still so rancid? So tepid? So bad that whenever you try to drink it, it leaves you disgusted for days on end … Is there still no refrigeration? And what of those acoustic battles between the flies and the everlasting hum of the quinine … Sulphate? Chloride? … in your ears? … But most of all: Are there still black people sweltering and pustulating in that caldron? Who knows? Maybe not. Maybe none of all that is there anymore, maybe a tornado broke loose one night, maybe the Little Congo, just in passing, gave Topo one good lick with its muddy tongue and it was all over. Maybe the whole place is dead and gone, the very name wiped off the maps, and nobody left to remember Alcide … Maybe his little niece has forgotten him too. Maybe Lieutenant Grappa never saw his Toulouse again … Maybe the jungle, which has always, year after year when the rainy season sets in, had designs on the dune, has recaptured the whole settlement, crushed it beneath the shade of its giant mahogany trees, even those unexpected little sand flowers that Alcide didn't want me to water … Maybe it's all gone …

I'll long remember those ten days going up the river … Huddled in the bottom of the canoe, watching out for muddy whirlpools, picking furtive passages between enormous drifting branches, nimbly avoided. A labor for convicts on the lam.

After every sundown we'd camp on a rocky promontory. Finally one morning we left that filthy native canoe and slipped into the forest by a hidden path that twined through the moist green gloom, lit only here and there by a ray of sunlight falling from the roof of that vast cathedral of leaves. Monstrous felled trees forced us to make frequent detours. Whole Metro trains could have maneuvered with ease in the hollows left by their roots. Suddenly the full light was on us again, we had come to a clearing and had to climb, an additional effort. The rise we had come to overlooked the endless forest, rolling over red, yellow, and green peaks, modeling and smoothing hill and dale, as monstrously spacious as the sea and the sky. I was given to understand by signs that the man whose habitation we were looking for lived just a little further on … in another valley. And there he was waiting for us.

He had built a sort of hut between two big boulders, sheltered, as he informed me, from the eastern tornadoes, which were the worst, the most furious. That, I was willing to admit, was an advantage, but the hut itself definitely belonged to the lowest, most ramshackle category, an almost theoretical edifice, coming apart at every seam. I had foreseen something of the sort, but this surpassed all my expectations.

The man must have thought I looked downcast, because he addressed me rather brusquely, to shake me out of my thoughts. "Come off it, you'll be better off here than in the trenches!

Here at least you can worry along. The food is rotten, I can't deny it, and there's nothing to drink but pure mud, but you can sleep as much as you like … There's no big guns here and no bullets! All in all, it's a bargain!" He talked something like the Director General, but he had pale eyes like Alcide's.

He must have been close to thirty, with a beard … I hadn't taken a good look at him on arriving, because on arriving I'd been thrown off by the dilapidation of the setup he was supposed to bequeath me and which might possibly be my home for years … But observing him later on, I found a distinctly adventurous face with sharply accentuated angles, one of those rebellious faces that plunge into life head-on instead of rolling with the waves, with a big round nose, and cheeks like coal barges, plashing against destiny with a soft babbling

sound. That was an unhappy man.

“It’s true,” I said. “There’s nothing worse than war.” I thought we’d said enough for the moment. I had no desire to say any more. It was he who went on:

“Especially now that they make them so long. Well anyway, friend, you’ll see that it’s no joke here! There’s nothing to do … It’s a sort of vacation … Except who’d want to spend a vacation in a place like this? Well, maybe it’s a matter of temperament. I wouldn’t know …”

“How about the water?” I asked. The water I saw in the cup I had poured myself had me worried, it was yellowish. I drank some, it was sickening and as warm as in Topo. A threeday sediment of mud.

“Is this the water?” The water torture was starting all over again.

“Yes, that’s all there is, except rain water … But when it starts raining, the shack won’t last long. You see the condition it’s in?”-I saw.

“The food,” he went on, “is all canned. That’s what I’ve been eating for a whole year … It hasn’t killed me. Convenient in a way, but it doesn’t stick to the ribs … The natives eat putrid manioc, that’s their business, they like it … For the last three months it’s been running through me … Diarrhea … Maybe it’s fever too, I’ve got both … Around five o’clock I’m more lucid … That’s how I know I’ve got fever, because it’s hard to feel hotter than you do already in this climate! … Actually, it’s probably the chills that tell you you’ve got a fever … And not being quite so bored, maybe that’s another sign … but that’s a matter of temperament too … maybe a few drinks would cheer us up … but I don’t go for drink … it doesn’t agree with me …”

He seemed to think very highly of what he called “temperament.” Then while he was at it, he gave me a little more of his delightful information: “By day it’s the heat, at night it’s the noise that’s hard to bear … It’s unbelievable . , , The animals go chasing round and round, to fuck or to kill each other, how do I know? … Either way, you never heard such a hullabaloo! … The loudest are the hyenas … They come up close to the shack … You’ll hear them! … You won’t have any doubts … It’s nothing like the quinine music , . , Sometimes you can mistake birds or big flies for quinine … It’s conceivable … But hyenas, the enormous way they laugh … They’re smelling your flesh … That’s what makes them laugh … They’re in a hurry to see you pass on! … You can even see their eyes shining, so I’m told … They feed on dead bodies … I’ve never looked into their eyes … I’m sorry in a way …”

“Sounds delightful!” I said.

But he hadn’t finished with the night life.

“Then there’s the village,” he went on … “There aren’t a hundred niggers in it, but they make enough rumpus for ten thousand. You’ll tell me what you think of it! And man! If it’s tomtoms you’re after, you’ve come to the right place! … If they’re not beating them because the moon is out, they’re beating them because the moon has gone by … There’s always some reason! … The sons-of-bitches seem to be in cahoots with the animals to drive us crazy!

So help me, I’d shoot the whole lot of them if I weren’t so tired … As it is, I put cotton in my ears … That’s even better … As long as I had vaseline in my medicine chest, I greased the cotton with it, now I use banana oil … Banana oil does the trick … That way they can gargle with thunderstorms if it makes them happy! It’s no skin off my ass with my ears full of greased cotton! I don’t hear a damned thing! These niggers are sick, they’re perverts!

You’ll see! … All day long they squat on the ground, you wouldn’t think them capable of moving as far as the nearest tree to piss against, but the minute it’s dark, surprise! Vice!

Nerves! Hysteria! Chunks of the night gone hysterical! That’s niggers for you, take it from me! Degenerate scum! …”

“Do they often come and buy from you?”

“Buy? You’re out of your mind! The trick is to rob them before they rob you! That’s business! At night of course they do as they please … with greased cotton in both ears! … they’d be fools to stand on ceremony! … Besides, as you see, my shack has no door … so naturally they help themselves … for them it’s the good life …”

“But what about your inventory?” I asked, utterly dismayed at what he had told me. “The Director General

told me … he made himself very clear … to draw up a meticulous inventory the moment I got here …"

"I have the honor," he replied with perfect calm, "of telling you that the Director can kiss my ass …"

"But won't you have to see him on your way through Fort-Gono?"

"I will never see either Fort-Gono or the Director again … It's a big forest, my young friend …"

"But where will you go?"

"If anyone asks you, tell them you don't know. But since you seem eager to learn, let me give you some very good advice before it's too late! Don't worry about the company any more than the Company worries about you! If you can run as fast as the Company screws its employees, I can tell you right now that you're due to win the Grand Prix! … So be thankful that I'm leaving you a little cash and ask no more! … As for the stock, if it's true that the Director told you to take charge of it … tell him there isn't any left, and that's that! … If he won't believe you, who cares? … They take us all for thieves anyway! So it won't make any difference to public opinion if for once we get a little something out of it … And besides, don't worry, the Director knows more about financial monkey-shines than anybody, so why contradict him? That's my opinion! What's yours? Everybody knows that for a man to come here he has to be prepared to kill his father and mother! Am I right?" I wasn't so sure all he'd been telling me was true, but either way this predecessor of mine struck me as an out-and-out bandit.

I wasn't at all easy in my mind. "Another mess I've fallen into!" I said to myself with increasing conviction. I stopped talking with that thug. In one corner, stowed every which way, I found the merchandise he was leaving me, a few scraps of cotton goods … But loincloths and shoes by the dozen, some boxes of pepper, several lamps, a douche can, a staggering quantity of canned "Cassoulet ŕ la Bordelaise," and lastly a picture post card of the Place Clichy.

"Next to the ridgepole you'll find the rubber and ivory I've bought from the niggers … I worked hard at first … And oh yes, here are three hundred francs … That's what's coming to you …"

Coming to me for what? I had no idea, but I didn't bother to ask him.

"You may still be able to manage a bit of barter," he said. "Because, you know, you'll have no use for money out here, only when you want to clear out …" He started laughing. Not wanting to cross him at the moment, I did likewise, I chimed in as if everything were hunky-dory.

In spite of the extreme destitution in which he'd been living for many months, he had surrounded himself with an elaborate domestic staff, consisting mostly of young boys, who fell all over themselves in their eagerness to bring him the household's one and only spoon or the matchless cup, or to extract with consummate skill the classical and inevitable burrowing chiggers from the soles of his feet. In return, he would often oblige them with a kindly hand between their thighs. The only work I ever saw him do was scratching himself, but that, like the shopkeeper at Fort-Gono, he did with the marvelous agility that can be observed only in the colonies.

The chairs and tables he bequeathed me showed me what ingenuity can do with crushed soapboxes. That sinister individual also taught me how it is possible, for want of anything better to do, to propel those ungainly, caparisoned caterpillars which, quivering and foaming at the mouth, kept assailing our forest cabin, far into the distance with a short swift kick. God help you if you are clumsy enough to crush one. You'll be punished with an entire week of intense stench, which rises slowly from that unforgettable mash. He had read somewhere that those horrible monsters were the oldest animals in the world, dating, so he claimed, back to the second geological period! "When we've come as far as they have, my boy, won't we stink too?" His exact words.

The sunsets in that African hell proved to be fabulous. They never missed. As tragic every time as a monumental murder of the sun! But the marvel was too great for one man alone. For a whole hour the sky paraded in great delirious spurts of scarlet from end to end; after that the green of the trees exploded and rose up in quivering trails to meet the first stars. Then the whole horizon turned gray again and then red, but this time a tired red that didn't last long. That was the end. All the colors fell back down on the forest in tatters, like streamers after the hundredth performance. It happened every day at exactly six o'clock. Then the night set in with all its monsters and its thousands and thousands of croaking toads.

The forest is only waiting for their signal to start trembling, hissing, and roaring from its depths. An enormous, love-maddened, unlighted railway station, full to bursting. Whole trees bristling with living noisemakers, mutilated erections, horror. After a while we couldn't hear each other talk in the hut. I had to

hoot across the table like a hoot owl for my companion to understand me. I was getting my money's worth. And remember, I didn't like the country.

"What's your name?" I asked him. "Did you say Robinson?" He had just been telling me that the natives in those parts suffered horribly from every conceivable disease and that the poor bastards were in no condition to engage in any kind of trade. While we were talking about the natives, so many flies and insects, so large and in such great numbers, dashed against the lamp in such dense squalls that we finally had to put it out.

Before dousing the lamp, I caught a glimpse of Robinson's face, veiled by a curtain of insects. That may be why his features impressed themselves more sharply on my memory, whereas before that they hadn't reminded me of anything in particular. He went on talking to me in the darkness, while I retraced the steps of my past with the sound of his voice as a charm with which to open the doors of the years and months and finally of my days, wondering where I could have run into this man. But I found nothing. No answer. You can lose your way groping among the shadows of the past. It's frightening how many people and things there are in a man's past that have stopped moving. The living people we've lost in the crypts of time sleep so soundly side by side with the dead that the same darkness envelops them all.

As we grow older, we no longer know whom to awaken, the living or the dead. I was trying to identify this Robinson when gales of hideously exaggerated laughter, not far away in the night, made me jump.

Then they fell silent. It must have been the hyenas he'd told me about. And then there was nothing but the villagers and their tomtoms, those crazy drums made of hollow wood, termites of the wind.

The name Robinson gnawed at me more and more insistently. In the darkness we talked about Europe and the meals you can order if you've got the money, not to mention the drinks! so deliciously cool! Not a word about the next day, when I was to be left alone, for years perhaps, with all those cans of cassoulet … Would war have been better? No, worse!

Definitely worse! … He thought so too … He'd been in the war himself … And nevertheless he was getting out of here … He was fed up with the forest, and that was that … I tried to bring him back to the war … But he wouldn't oblige … Finally, as we were getting ready for bed, each in his corner of that shambles of leaves and partitions, he came right out with it: he preferred the risk of being haled into court for theft to living on cassoulet as he'd been doing for almost a year. Then I saw the lie of the land.

"Haven't you any cotton for your ears?" he asked me … "If not, you'd better make some with the nap of a blanket and a drop of banana oil. You can make very nice little plugs that way … I for my part refuse to put up with the bellowing of those baboons … !" Actually that concert had everything in it but baboons, but he clung to his inept generic term.

It suddenly occurred to me that this business with the cotton must be a cloak for some fiendish trick. I was seized with fear that he'd murder me there on my folding bed and make off with what was left in the money box … The idea paralyzed me. But what could I do?

Call for help? Call who? The village cannibals? … I thought of myself as missing. Even in Paris a man without money, without debts, without hope of an inheritance, hardly exists, he's missing to all intents and purposes … So what could I expect here? Who'd bother to come to Bikomimbo and even honor my memory by spitting in the water? Nobody of course.

Hours of intermittent terror. He didn't snore. All those sounds, those calls from the forest made it hard for me to hear him breathe. No need of cotton. I kept puzzling, and finally the name Robinson revealed a body, a posture, a voice I had known … And just as I was giving in to sleep, the whole man stood before my bed, I held him fast, not him of course, but the memory of this Robinson, the man at Noirceur-sur-la-Lys in Flanders, who'd been with me on the fringes of that night when we went looking for a hole through which to escape from the war, and then the same man later in Paris … It all came back to me. Years passed in a few moments. I'd been unhappy, sick in the head … Now that I knew, now that I'd placed him, I couldn't help it, I was thoroughly scared. Had he recognized me? In any case he could count on my silence and complicity.

"Robinson! Robinson!" I cried out cheerfully, as if I had good news for him. "Hey, old man! Hey, Robinson!" … No answer.

With pounding heart I got up, expecting a mean jab in the gut … Nothing. Then, rather bravely, I groped my way to the other end of the shack, where I'd seen him go to bed. He was gone.

Striking a match now and then, I waited for daybreak. The day came in a burst of light and so did the black servants, laughing and offering me their enormous uselessness. At least they were cheerful, I'll admit that.

From the first, they tried to teach me the art of not giving a damn. I did my best to explain with a series of carefully studied gestures how terribly Robinson's disappearance had me worried. No use. It was all the same to them. True, it's senseless to worry about anything that isn't right in front of your nose. What bothered me most about all this was the money box. But when someone walks off with a money box, you seldom see him again … I therefore decided that Robinson was most unlikely to come back and murder me. Which was that much gained.

So the whole landscape was mine! I'd have all the time I needed., I thought, to study the surface and the depths of this leafy immensity, this ocean of red, of mottled yellow, of flamboyant hams and head cheeses, magnificent no doubt for people who love nature. I definitely didn't. The poetry of the tropics turned my stomach. The thought of all those vistas repeated on me like tuna fish. Say what you like, it will never be anything but a country for mosquitoes and panthers. And not for me.

I preferred to go back to my shack and fix it up in anticipation of the tornado that could not be long in coming. But I was soon obliged to abandon my attempts at reinforcement. The standard parts of the structure were amenable to further disintegration but defied repair, the vermin-infested thatch was coming apart, you couldn't have made a decent urinal out of my home.

After I had described a few listless circles in the bush, the sun forced me to go back in and silently collapse. The same old sun! At the noon hour everything falls silent, everything is afraid of burning up. And it wouldn't take much, grass, animals, and people are heated through. Meridian apoplexy.

My one and only chicken, bequeathed to me by Robinson, dreaded the noon hour the same as I did, he'd go back in with me. For three weeks the chicken lived with me like that, following me like a dog, clucking constantly, seeing snakes wherever he went. One day of extreme boredom, I ate him. He had no taste at all, his flesh had been bleached by the sun like an awning. Maybe he was what made me so sick. Be that as it may, the morning after that meal I couldn't get up. Around noon, completely groggy, I dragged myself to the medicine chest. There was nothing in it but some iodine and a map of the Nord-Sud Métro.

I hadn't seen a single customer in the store, only a few villagers who came to look-see, interminably gesticulating and chewing cola, ridden with sex and malaria. They gathered in a circle around me and seemed to be discussing my ugly mug. I was a hundred-percent sick, I felt as if I had no further use for my legs, they just hung over the edge of my bed like unimportant and rather ridiculous objects.

All the runners brought me from the Director in Fort-Gono was letters stinking with insults and idiocy, and threatening what's more. Businessmen all think of themselves as big or little professional wizards, but in practice they usually turn out to be hopeless incompetents. My mother, writing from France, admonished me to take care of my health, as she had during the war. My head could be all set for the guillotine, and still my mother would scold me for forgetting my muffler. She never missed an opportunity to try and convince me that the world is a kindly place and that she'd done a good job in conceiving me. This alleged Providence was the great subterfuge of maternal thoughtlessness. It was easy for me, I have to admit, to leave all my boss's and mother's hogwash unanswered, and the fact is I never did answer their letters. Clever of me, but it didn't improve my situation. Robinson had made off with almost everything that fragile edifice had contained, but who'd believe me if I said so? Write letters? What for? To whom? At about five every afternoon I shook with a violent fever, my bed jiggled and rattled as if I'd been vigorously jerking off. A bunch of blacks from the village had come to wait on me and taken possession of the hut; I hadn't sent for them, but to send them away would have been too much of an effort. They squabbled over the remains of the stock, rummaged through the kegs of tobacco, tried on the last of the loincloths, felt the material, and took them off, adding, if that was possible, to the general disorder of my establishment. The rubber was all over the ground, mingling its juice with the bush melons and those sickly-sweet papayas that taste like pissy pears … I ate so many of them in place of beans that now, fifteen years later, the memory of them still turns my stomach.

I tried to gauge the degree of hopelessness to which I had fallen. I couldn't. "Everybody steals!" Robinson had said to me three times before disappearing. The Director was of the same opinion. In my fever those words ran through me like shooting pains. "You've got to figure the angles!" He'd said that too. I tried to get up, I couldn't make it. He'd been right about the water we had to drink, it was concentrated muck. Little black boys brought me bananas, big ones, little ones, red ones, and more and more papayas, but I was so sick of all that and everything else! I'd have vomited up the whole globe.

As soon as I felt a tiny bit better and not quite so dazed, I was seized again with a horrible fear, the fear that the Company would call me to account. What would I say to those devils?

How would I get them to believe me? They'd have me arrested for sure! And who would try me? A bunch of special judges, something like a court-martial, armed with terrible laws they had gotten from God knows

where, who never tell their real intentions and who for the sheer fun of it make you drag your bleeding steps up the steep path overlooking hell, the path that leads poor bastards to their death. The Law is a big Luna Park of suffering. When a poor man lets himself get caught in it, you'll hear him screaming for centuries on end.

I preferred to lie there in a stupor, trembling and foaming at the mouth with a 104° fever, than to be lucid and forced to think of what would happen to me in Fort-Gono. I even stopped taking my quinine because I figured the fever would keep life away from me. You get drunk on what you've got. While I lay there sweltering, I ran out of matches. They'd been in short supply. Robinson hadn't left me a thing, only "Cassoulet ŕ la Bordelaise." But plenty of that, I assure you. I threw up whole tins of it. And even to arrive at that result, you had to heat them.

The shortage of matches provided me with one little amusement, watching my cook light his fire with two pieces of flint and some dry grass. It was while I was watching him that the idea came to me. With plenty of fever added, my idea became wonderfully vivid. Though clumsy by nature, I was able after applying myself for a month to light a fire with two sharp stones like a savage. In short, I was learning how to make do under primitive conditions. Fire is the first thing; then there's hunting, but I wasn't interested in that. My flame was all I needed, and I practiced conscientiously. Day after day I had nothing else to do. I never got nearly as good at the sport of propelling those "secondary" caterpillars. I didn't quite get the knack. I squashed a lot of them, and then I lost interest. I gave them the run of the house?like old friends. There were two big storms, the second went on for three days and, worse, for three nights. At last I had drinking water in the bucket, tepid to be sure, but even so … In the deluge the scraps of goods in my little stock began to run and intermingle, a disgusting mess.

Some of the natives obligingly brought me lianas from the forest to anchor my shack to the ground, but in vain; at the slightest wind, the leafy walls would flap wildly against the roof like wounded wings. There was nothing I could do about it. Never a dull moment. Blacks big and small decided to join me in my downfall, they got more and more familiar. And they were so very happy. What fun! They came and went as they pleased in my socalled home. Freedom! As a sign of perfect understanding we exchanged signs. If I hadn't had fever, I might have started learning their language. There wasn't time enough. I made very good progress in fire-making, but I hadn't yet mastered their best manner. I wasn't very quick about it. Showers of sparks still flew into my eyes, which gave my black friends a good laugh.

When I wasn't moldering with fever on my folding bed or working my primitive tinderbox, I thought of the Company's accounts. It's funny how hard it is to throw off one's dread of irregular accounts. I'd undoubtedly inherited that from my mother, she'd contaminated me with her "He who steals a pin will steal a pound … and end up murdering his mother." We all find it hard to throw off those ideas. We pick them up in childhood, and they come back to terrify us later on, in every crisis. Our only hope of getting rid of them is the force of circumstances! Luckily the force of circumstances is enormous. Meanwhile the store and I were sinking. One of these days we'd be swallowed up by the mud, which got thicker and more viscous with every downpour. The rainy season. What looked like a boulder yesterday was oozy molasses today. Tepid water fell in cascades from dangling branches and followed one everywhere, it invaded the hut and spread round about as in an old abandoned riverbed. The rain made a porridge of my merchandise, my hopes, and my accounts, and so did my fever, which was also very moist. The rain was so compact that when it hit you it stopped your mouth like a lukewarm gag. But the flood didn't stop the animals from getting together, the nightingales started making as much noise as jackals. Anarchy all over the ark, and I a doddering Noah. This, I thought, had been going on long enough.

Ah my mother's adages weren't about honesty. As I remembered opportunely, she used to say when burning old bandages: "Nothing purifies like fire!" A mother leaves you something for every turn of Fate. You just have to take your pick.

The time had come. My pieces of flint were not very well chosen, not sharp enough, most of the sparks struck my hands. In the end, however, some of my merchandise took fire in spite of the dampness: a parcel of sopping wet socks. It happened after sundown. The flames rose impetuously. Wildly jabbering, the villagers gathered around the blaze. The crude rubber that Robinson had bought was sizzling in the middle, and the smell reminded me invincibly of the famous Telephone Company fire on the Quai de Grenelle that I'd gone to see with my Uncle Charles, who sang sentimental ballads so well. That was the year before the big Exposition, when I was very young. Nothing brings memories to the surface like smells and flames. My shack smelled exactly that way. Though drenched, it burned very thoroughly to the ground, merchandise and all … No more accounts. The owls and leopards, toads and parrots must have been flabbergasted. It takes something to impress that crowd. Like war with us. Now the forest could come back and cover the wreckage with its thundering leaves. I hadn't saved anything but my personal belongings, my folding bed, the three hundred francs, and naturally, sad to say, a few cans of cassoulet for the road.

When the fire had been burning for an hour, hardly anything was left of the shack. A few tongues of flame in the rain and a few jabbering black men poking about in the ashes with the tips of their spears amid gusts of the smell that clings to all catastrophes, emanates from all the defeats of this world, the smell of smoking gunpowder.

Now was the time to make quick tracks. Back to Fort-Gono, retrace my steps? Try to explain my conduct and the circumstances of the present disaster? I hesitated … Not for long. Nothing can be explained. The world only knows how to do one thing, to roll over and kill you, as a sleeper kills his fleas. That would be a stupid way to die, I said to myself, to let myself be crushed like everybody else. To put your trust in men is to get yourself killed a little.

In spite of the condition I was in, I decided to head straight into the bush in the direction taken by that infernal Robinson.

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Often on my way I heard the beasts of the jungle with their plaints and calls and tremolos, but I hardly ever saw them. I don't count the little wild pig I almost stepped on one day not far from my shelter. Hearing those torrents of calls and screams and roars, you had the impression that they were close by, hundreds and thousands of them. And yet, when you got to the place where the hubbub came from, there was nobody there, except for those big blue guinea fowl, all trussed up in their plumage as if they were going to a wedding and so clumsy when they jumped coughing from branch to branch that you thought they must have had an accident.

Lower down, in the musty undergrowth, big heavy butterflies, bordered like death notices, quivered with the effort of opening their wings, and lower still it was us, sloshing through the yellow mud. We had trouble getting ahead, especially because the blacks were carrying me in a litter made of sacks sewn end to end. They could easily have tossed me in the drink while we were crossing a stream. Why didn't they? I found out later. Or they could have eaten me, since that was one of their customs.

Now and then I'd question them with my thick tongue, and every time they answered: Yes, yes. Always glad to oblige. Good fellows. Whenever my diarrhea let me go for a while, the fever took hold. You wouldn't believe how sick I was. I couldn't see things clearly anymore, or rather, everything was beginning to look green. After nightfall all the animals of creation surrounded our camp. We'd make a fire. But here and there, even so, a cry would pierce the great black awning that stifled us. Despite its horror of men and fire, a wounded, dying animal would manage to complain to us, seeing we were right there. After the fourth day I stopped even trying to distinguish reality from the absurd fever images that went chasing one another through my head along with fragments of people and endless tatters of resolutions and disappointments.

Even so, I tell myself today when I think about it that the bearded white man we met one morning on a stony promontory near the meeting of two rivers must have been real. A cataract nearby was making a hellish din. He was a sergeant, something like Alcide, except this one was Spanish. Worrying along from trail to trail, we'd ended up in the colony of Rio del Rio, an ancient possession of the Crown of Castile. That poor Spanish soldier also had a shack. I seem to remember that he laughed when I told him about my misadventures and what I'd done with my shack! His, I have to admit, looked a little better, but not much. His special cross was the red ants. On their annual migration those little bitches had elected to pass straight through his shack, and they'd been at it for going on two months. They took up practically all the space; you could hardly turn around, and if you got in their way, they pinched you hard.

He was overjoyed when I gave him some of my cassoulet, because he'd been living on tomatoes for the last three years. I couldn't better that. All by himself, he told me, he had downed more than three thousand cans. Tired of preparing the tomatoes in different ways, he had taken to sucking the cans like eggs, through two little holes in the lid. When the red ants discovered that a new variety of canned goods had arrived, they mounted guard around the cassoulet. It wouldn't have been advisable to leave a freshly opened can standing; they'd have summoned the whole nation of red ants to the shack. There are no bigger communists anywhere. And they'd have eaten up the Spaniard too. My host informed me that the capital of Rio del Rio was called San Tapeta, a seaport famous all along the coast for its transoceanic galleys.

It so happened that the track we were on ended there, we would just have to go straight ahead for three days and three nights. I was good and sick of my delirium, so I asked the Spaniard if he knew of some good native medicine that would straighten me out. My head was acting up something terrible. But he wouldn't hear of any such mumbo jumbo. For a Spanish colonial he was strangely Africanophobic, so much so that when he went to the toilet he refused to use banana leaves and kept a whole sheaf of the *Boletín de Asturias*, cut up in little pieces for that express purpose. And he didn't read the paper . . ? same as Alcide. For three years he'd been living there alone with the ants, a few little kinks, and his old newspapers. What with his awful Spanish accent, which was so strong it was like having somebody else in the room, it was hard to get him stirred up about anything. When he chewed out his natives, it was like a tempest. For loudness of mouth, Alcide couldn't hold a candle to him. I took such a liking to that Spaniard that in the end I gave him all my cassoulet. Out of gratitude he made me a lovely passport on grainy paper stamped with the arms of Castile, with a signature so elaborate, so finicky, that it took him at least ten minutes to get it right.

He'd told the truth, you couldn't miss the road to San Tapeta, you only had to follow your nose. I don't remember the trip, but of one thing I'm sure, that as soon as we got there they handed me over to a priest who was so gaga that having him beside me gave me a kind of comparative self-confidence. But not for long.

The town of San Tapeta was plunked down on the side of a rock, directly facing the sea. It was hard to believe how green the place was. A magnificent spectacle no doubt, seen from the roadstead, splendid from a distance

… On the spot, though, there was nothing to admire but the same overworked carcasses as in Fort-Gono, everlastingly sweating and pustulating. In a lucid moment I dismissed the blacks of my little caravan. They'd crossed a long stretch of jungle and feared for their lives going back, so they said. In leaving me, they wept in advance at the thought of the journey, but 1 hadn't the strength to feel sorry for them. I had suffered and sweated too much. And I was still at it.

By day and by night, to the best of my recollection, a lot of jabberers?they were decidedly in plentiful supply? crowded around my bed, which had been set up for that very purpose in the presbytery, since entertainment was rare in San Tapeta. The priest filled me with *tisanes*, a long gilded crucifix dangled over his belly, and when he came near me a loud clinking of coins rose from the depths of his soutane. Conversation with those people was out of the question. It exhausted me completely just to mumble a word or two. I really thought it was all up with me, and I tried to take a last look at what could be seen of the world through the priest's window. I doubt if I could describe those gardens today without gross and outlandish mistakes. The sun was there, I can vouch for that, always the same, as if somebody had opened a big furnace in your face, and then behind it there was more sun and insane trees, whole avenues of them, those lettuces as big as oaks and those African dandelions, three or four of which would add up to a perfectly good chestnut tree in France. Throw in a toad or two, as hefty as spaniels, waddling furtively from one flowerbed to the next.

People, countries, and objects all end up as smells. I kept my eyes closed because I really couldn't open them anymore, Then from night to night the sharp smell of Africa was blunted. It became harder for me to recapture that heavy mixture of decaying soil, human crotches, and ground saffron.

Time, patches of the past, then more time, and then at a certain moment I felt a series of jolts and twists, and then the jolting became more regular, a swaying, a rocking … I was still lying down, that was sure, but whatever I was lying on was moving. I let myself go, I vomited, then I woke up again and fell asleep again. I was on the sea. I felt so faint that I barely had the strength to catch the new smell of ropes and tar. It was cool in the heaving niche where I was lying directly under a wide-open porthole. They'd left me alone. Evidently my journey was continuing … But what journey? I heard steps on the deck, a wooden deck right over my nose, and voices, and the waves lashing and melting against the ship's side.

Life seldom comes back to your deathbed, wherever you may be, except in the form of a low-down trick. The one those people in San Tapeta had played on me filled the bill. Taking advantage of my befuddled state, they'd sold me to the captain of a galley. A fine galley, to be sure, high of hull, well fitted with oars, crowned with beautiful purple sails, gilded figurehead, superbly upholstered officers' quarters, and on the prow a magnificent cod-liver-oil painting of the *Infanta Combitta* dressed for polo. The Infanta, I was told later on, was the ship's sponsor, offering it the protection of her name, her tits, and her royal dignity. It was flattering.

After all, I reflected when I realized what had happened, in San Tapeta I was as sick as a dog, the whole world was spinning, and I'd certainly have died in that presbytery where the natives had left me … Return to Fort-Gono? … Those accounts would certainly have got me fifteen years … Here at least I was moving, and that was ground for hope . . ? Come to think of it, the captain of the *Infanta Combitta* had taken a big chance in buying me, even dirt cheap, from that priest before weighing anchor. It was a risky investment, for that captain could have lost all his money … He was counting on the brisk sea air to revive me. He deserved a reward and obviously he was winning his bet, for I was already recovering. I could see he was as pleased as Punch. I still raved quite a lot, but with a certain logic … After I opened my eyes, he often came to see me in my cubbyhole. He was always wearing his plumed hat. That's how I saw him.

It amused him to see me try to raise myself on my pallet in spite of my fever. "All right, shitass!" he'd say. "You'll soon be able to row with the rest of them!" A kindly thought. He roared with laughter, giving me little strokes of his whip, but in a friendly kind of way, on the back of my neck, not on my rear end. He wanted me to laugh too, to share his pleasure at the business acumen he'd shown in acquiring me.

The food on board struck me as quite acceptable. My speech was still muddled. Soon, as the captain had foreseen, I recovered enough strength to join the boys at the oars. But where there were ten oarsmen, I saw a hundred: multiple vision.

The crossing wasn't fatiguing, because most of the time we were under sail. Our conditions between decks were no more nauseating than those of the usual third-class passengers on a Sunday excursion train, and not nearly as perilous as what I'd endured on the *Admiral Bragueton* coming out. There was always plenty of breeze on this voyage from the east to the west of the Atlantic. The temperature dropped. Nobody complained about that between decks. The only trouble was that the trip seemed to be taking a long time. For my part, I had seen enough seascapes and jungle vistas to last me an eternity.

I'd have liked to ask the captain a few questions about the aim and purpose of this trip, but once I was

definitely on the mend, he lost interest in me. Anyway, I was still driveling too much for conversation. From then on I saw him only from a distance, like a real boss. I started looking for Robinson among the galley slaves, and several times in the silence of the night I called him in a loud voice. There was no answer except for a few insults and threats from the other galley slaves.

Still, the more I thought about the details and circumstances of my adventure, the more likely it seemed to me that the same thing must have happened to him in San Tapeta. Except that Robinson must be rowing on some other galley. Those jungle niggers, I thought, must all have a hand in the racket. Why shouldn't they take their turn? They've got to live, haven't they? … so naturally they sell the things and people they can't eat right away. The natives'

relative kindness to me could be attributed to the most sordid of motives. For weeks and weeks the *Infanta Combitta* sailed over the rolling Atlantic from fit of fever to fit of seasickness, and then one evening all was calm around us. My delirium was gone. We were bobbing at anchor. Waking next day, we realized on opening the portholes that we had reached our destination. And what a sight it was!

Talk of surprises! What we suddenly discovered through the fog was so amazing that at first we refused to believe it, but then, when we were face to face with it, galley slaves or not, we couldn't help laughing, seeing it right there in front of us … Just imagine, that city was standing absolutely erect. New York was a standing city. Of course we'd seen cities, fine ones too, and magnificent seaports. But in our part of the world cities lie along the seacoast or on rivers, they recline on the landscape, awaiting the traveler, while this American city had nothing languid about her, she stood there as stiff as a board, not seductive at all, terrifyingly stiff.

We laughed like fools. You can't help laughing at a city built straight up and down like that. But we could only laugh from the neck up, because of the cold blowing in from the sea through a gray and pink mist, a brisk sharp wind that attacked our pants and the chinks in that wall, I mean the city streets, which engulfed the wind-borne clouds. Our galley spun its narrow wake just outside the docks, at the end of the shit-colored bay, asplash with schools of rowboats and avid, tooting tugs.

When you're down at heel, it's never much fun landing anywhere, but for a galley slave it's a lot worse, especially in America, because those people don't like the galley slaves that come over from Europe at all. "They're anarchists!" That's what they say. The only people they really welcome are tourists, who bring them dough, because all the currencies of Europe are relatives of the Dollar.

I might have tried what others had succeeded in doing, swimming across the harbor and once on land start shouting: "Long live Dollar! Long live Dollar!" It's a gimmick. A lot of people have landed that way and made a fortune. It's not certain, but so they say. Even worse things happen in dreams. I had a different plan in my head, along with my fever. On board the galley I'd become an expert at counting fleas (not just catching them but adding and subtracting them, in short, compiling statistics), a subtle skill, which looks like nothing at all, but still it's a technique and I thought I'd make use of it. You can say what you like about the Americans, but when it comes to techniques, they're connoisseurs. They'd be crazy about my way of counting fleas, I was sure of that in advance. I was convinced that I couldn't fail.

I was about to offer them my services when suddenly our galley was ordered to its quarantine station, a sheltered cove nearby, within hailing distance of a small village at the end of a quiet bay, two miles east of New York.

There we remained under observation for weeks and weeks, long enough to acquire a daily routine. Every evening after supper, for instance, our water squad would go ashore and make its way to the village. To attain my ends I'd have to go along. My shipmates knew what I had in mind, but the adventure didn't tempt them. "He's mad but harmless," they said. The food wasn't bad on board the *Infanta Combitta*, they got clubbed now and then, but not too badly, and all in all it was bearable. An average sort of job. And it had one sublime advantage, you couldn't be fired from a galley, and the king had even promised them a small pension at the age of sixty-two. That prospect made them happy, it gave them something to dream about, and another thing: they played at voting on Sundays, it gave them a feeling of freedom.

We were kept in quarantine for weeks, the men bellowed between decks, they fought and buggered one another by turns. But their main reason for not wanting to escape with me was that they were absolutely down on this America that I was so smitten with. We all have our bugaboos, and theirs was America. They even tried to sour me on it. I told them I knew people there, my little Lola among others, who must have been loaded by then, and Robinson no doubt, who had surely carved himself a niche in the business world, but they clung to their aversion for the United States, their disgust, their hatred: "You'll always have a screw loose," they said. One day I made as if to join their expedition to the village water tap, and then I told them I wasn't going back to the galley. Good-bye!

They were a good bunch all in all, hard workers. They told me again that they didn't approve one bit of what I was doing, but they wished me good luck and plenty of fun all the same, in their own way. "Go!" they said. "Go right ahead! But we're warning you: You haven't got the right ideas for a beggar! It's your fever that scrambles your brains! You'll come back from that America of yours in worse condition than we are! Your fancy ideas will be the end of you! You want to learn things? You know too much already for the likes of you!"

I tried to tell them I had friends who were expecting me. I spluttered and stammered.

"Friends?" they said. "Your friends couldn't care less! Your friends forgot you long ago! …"

"But I want to see Americans," I insisted. "And besides, they've got women like nowhere else in the world!"

"Wise guy!" they said. "Come on back with us. Believe us, it's not worth it. You'll make yourself sicker than you are. We'll tell you what Americans are like! They're either millionaires or skunks! There's nothing in between! The shape you're in you certainly won't be seeing any millionaires! But don't worry, you'll get your fill of skunks, you can be sure of that! And it won't be long, oh no!"

That's the way they spoke to me. A bunch of jerks, cock-suckers, subhumans, they made me sick! "Beat it, the whole lot of you!" I told them. "You're green with envy, that's all!

We'll see if the Americans skin me alive! But one thing is sure, you've all got ladyfingers between your legs, and limp ones at that!"

I told them off, and after that I felt fine.

Night was coming on, and the galley was blowing the whistle for them. They all started rowing in cadence, all but one, me. I waited till I couldn't hear them anymore, then I counted up to a hundred and ran to the village as fast as I could. That village was a pretty little place, well lit, wooden houses just waiting to be used, lined up to the right and left of a chapel, all perfectly silent. Unfortunately I was shivering with malaria and fear. Here and there I came across a sailor from the garrison?those people seemed to be taking it pretty easy?and even a few children and then a young girl with delightful muscles. That was America! I had arrived! It's a pleasure to see that sort of thing after so many parched adventures. It's as life-giving as fruit. I'd stumbled on the one useless village in the whole country. A small garrison of sailors and their families kept its installations hi readiness for the conceivable day when a raging plague, imported by a boat like ours, would threaten the metropolis.

Those installations would be used for killing off as many foreigners as possible, so as to keep the city population from catching anything. They even had a cemetery ready, with flowers all over. They were waiting. For sixty years they'd been waiting. Waiting was all they did.

Finding an empty shack, I slipped in and fell asleep instantly. In the morning the streets were full of sailors in short pants, sturdy, well-built fellows, wielding brooms and sloshing water around my refuge and on all the streets and squares of that theoretical village. I tried to look unconcerned, but I was so hungry that in spite of my fears I headed for a place where there was a smell of cooking.

That's where I was spotted and cornered between two squads of sailors, determined to identify me. Their first idea was to chuck me in the water. Taken straight to the Head Quarantine Officer, I was in a bad way. Though constant adversity had led me to develop a certain crust, I still felt too steeped in fever to risk any of my brilliant improvisations. My mind was wandering, and my heart wasn't in it.

The best policy was to lose consciousness. Which I did. In the office where I later came to, some ladies in light-colored dresses had replaced the men around me. They put me through a vague and benevolent interrogation, which would have been plenty for me. But benevolence never lasts in this world, and the next day the men started talking prison to me again. I took the opportunity to bring up fleas, just in passing, so to speak … How I could catch them … and count them … my specialty … as well as classify these parasites and compile flawless statistics. I saw that my approach interested my guards, I had captured their attention. They were listening. But as for believing me, that was a different kettle of fish.

Finally, the commanding officer of the station turned up. He was called the "Surgeon General," which would be a good name for a fish. He spoke roughly, but with more authority than the others. "What's this you're telling us, boy?" he said. "You say you can count fleas? Really now!" He thought that would shut me up, but not at all. One two three I reeled off the little spiel I had prepared. "I believe in the enumeration of fleas! It's a civilizing factor, because enumeration is the basis of the most invaluable statistical data! … A progressive country must know the number of its fleas, broken down according to sex, age group, year and season …"

“Come, come, young man! Enough of your hogwash!” the

Surgeon General broke in, “You’re not the first! Other young scamps from Europe have been here before you, telling us the same kind of fairy tales, but in the end they turned out to be anarchists like the rest of them, only worse … They didn’t even believe in Anarchy any more! Enough of your boasting! … Tomorrow we’ll try you out on the immigrants over there on Ellis Island, in the shower room! Major Mischief, my assistant, will tell me if you’ve been lying. For two months now Major Mischief has been clamoring for an expert flea counter. We’ll assign you to him for a try! Dismissed! And if you’ve lied to us, we’ll chuck you in the drink! Dismissed! And watch your step!”

I withdrew from the presence of that American authority as I had withdrawn from so many authorities, by presenting first my pecker and then, by a deft about-face, my rear end, accompanying the whole with a military salute.

This statistics racket, it seemed to me, was as good a way as any other of getting me to New York. The very next day, Mischief, the major in question, told me in a few words what my work would be. He was a fat, jaundiced-looking man, as nearsighted as it’s possible to be, with enormous smoked glasses. He must have recognized me the way wild animals recognize their victims, by the general outline, because with those glasses he was wearing he couldn’t possibly have distinguished any features.

On the job we got along fine. I even think that by the end of my stay Mischief had taken quite a liking to me. In the first place, not seeing a person is an excellent reason for taking a liking to him, and besides he was delighted at my brilliant flea-catching technique. Nobody else in the whole station could hold a candle to me when it came to catching and boxing the most restive, keratosed, and impatient of fleas. I was able to classify them by sex before they had even been removed from the immigrant. I don’t mind telling you, my work was amazing … In the end Mischief trusted my skill implicitly.

By late afternoon the nails of my thumb and forefinger were bruised from crushing fleas, but my day’s work wasn’t over, I still had to line up the columns of my daily statistical table: So-and-so many Polish … Yugoslavian … Spanish fleas … Crimean crabs … Peruvian chiggers … every furtive, biting thing that travels on human derelicts ended under my fingernails. As you see, my work was both monumental and meticulous. Our calculations were completed in New York in a special office equipped with electrical fleacounting machines. Every day the little quarantine tug crossed the whole harbor, carrying our figures to be processed or checked.

Days and days passed, my health picked up, but, as my fever and delirium abated in those comfortable surroundings, my craving for adventure and daring exploits revived and became imperious. At ninety-eight point six everything is boring.

Yet I could have stayed there, with not a thing to worry about, well fed at the station mess. Best of all, it seems worth adding, Major Mischief’s daughter, a stunning young lady of fifteen, used to turn up in extremely short skirts after five o’clock and play tennis directly under the window of our office. I’ve seldom seen finer legs, still slightly on the mannish side perhaps, yet on their way to becoming more delicate, a splendid specimen of burgeoning flesh. A challenge to happiness, a promise to make a man shout for joy. Some of the young ensigns of the detachment followed her everywhere.

Those young scamps had no need to justify themselves by doing useful work like me! I didn’t miss the slightest detail of their caperings around my little idol. Just watching them, I found myself blanching several times a day. After a while, I began to think that maybe at night I could pass for a sailor myself. I was still fondling that hope when, one Saturday in the twenty-third week of my stay, the situation ripened. The man in charge of shuttling the statistics back and forth, an Armenian, was suddenly promoted to the post of executive flea counter in Alaska, where he’d be dealing with the prospectors’ dogs. A fine promotion if ever there was one, and true enough, the man was delighted. The Alaskan dog teams are invaluable. Since they are always needed, they are well cared for. Whereas nobody gives a damn about immigrants, of whom there are always too many. That left no one to take our figures to New York, and in a twinkling I was assigned to the task. Before I shoved off, Mischief, my boss, shook hands with me and urged me to be good and behave myself in town. That was the last bit of advice that estimable man ever gave me, and just as he had never seen me up to that time, he never saw me again. As soon as we went ashore, the rain came down in buckets, penetrated my thin jacket, and soaked the statistics, which gradually melted away in my hand. Nevertheless, I made a big wad with some of them and let it stick out of my pocket to make me look more or less like a businessman when I hit town. Thereupon, trembling with fear and emotion, I hurried off in quest of new adventures.

Raising my eyes to the ramparts, I felt a kind of reverse vertigo, because there were really too many windows and so much alike whichever way you looked that it turned my stomach.

Flimsily clad, chilled to the bone, I made for the darkest crevice I could find in that giant façade, hoping that the people would hardly notice me in their midst. My embarrassment was quite superfluous. I had nothing to fear. In the street I had chosen, really the narrowest of all, no wider than a good-sized brook in our part of the world and extraordinarily dirty, damp and dark at the bottom, there were so many other people, big and little, thin and fat, that they carried me along with them like a shadow. They were going to town like me, on their way to work no doubt. Poor people like everywhere else.

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As if I knew where I was going, I put on an air of choosing and changed my direction, taking a different street on my right, one that was better lit. “Broadway” it was called. I read the name on a sign. High up, far above the uppermost stories, there was still a bit of daylight, with sea gulls and patches of sky. We moved in the lower light, a sick sort of jungle light, so gray that the street seemed to be full of grimy cotton waste. That street was like a dismal gash, endless, with us at the bottom of it, filling it from side to side, advancing from sorrow to sorrow, toward an end that is never in sight, the end of all the streets in the world.

There were no cars or carriages, only people and more people.

This was the priceless district, I was told later, the gold district: Manhattan. You can enter it only on foot, like a church. It’s the banking heart and center of the present-day world. Yet some of those people spit on the sidewalk as they pass. You’ve got to have your nerve with you.

It’s a district filled with gold, a miracle, and through the doors you can actually hear the miracle, the sound of dollars being crumpled, for the Dollar is always too light, a genuine Holy Ghost, more precious than blood.

I found time to go and see them, I even went in and spoke to the employees who guard the cash. They’re sad and underpaid.

When the faithful enter their bank, don’t go thinking they can help themselves as they please. Far from it. In speaking to Dollar, they mumble words through a little grill; that’s their confessional. Not much sound, dim light, a tiny wicket between high arches, that’s all. They don’t swallow the Host, they put it on their hearts. I couldn’t stay there long admiring them. I had to follow the crowd in the street, between those walls of smooth shadow. Suddenly our street widened, like a crevasse opening out into a bright clearing. Up ahead of us we saw a great pool of sea-green light, wedged between hordes of monstrous buildings. And in the middle of the clearing stood a rather countrified-looking house, surrounded by woebegone lawns.

I asked several people in the crowd what this edifice was, but most of them pretended not to hear me. They couldn’t spare the time. But one young fellow right next to me was kind enough to tell me it was City Hall, adding that it was an ancient monument dating back to colonial times, ever so historical … so they’d left it there … The fringes of this oasis formed a kind of park with benches, where you could sit comfortably enough and look at the building. When I got there, there was hardly anything else to see. I waited more than an hour in the same place, and then toward noon, from the half-light, from the shuffling, discontinuous, dismal crowd, there erupted a sudden avalanche of absolutely and undeniably beautiful women.

What a discovery! What an America! What ecstasy! I thought of Lola … Her promises had not deceived me! It was true.

I had come to the heart of my pilgrimage. And if my appetite hadn’t kept calling itself to my attention, that would have struck me as one of those moments of supernatural aesthetic revelation. If I’d been a little more comfortable and confident, the incessant beauties I was discovering might have ravished me from my base human condition. In short, all I needed was a sandwich to make me believe in miracles. But how I needed that sandwich!

And yet, what supple grace! What incredible delicacy of form and feature! What inspired harmonies! What perilous nuances! Triumphant where the danger is greatest! Every conceivable promise of face and figure fulfilled! Those blondes! Those brunettes! Those Titian redheads! And more and more kept coming! Maybe, I thought, this is Greece starting all over again. Looks like I got here just in time.

What made those apparitions all the more divine in my eyes was that they seemed totally unaware of my existence as I sat on a bench close by, slap-happy, drooling with eroticomystical admiration and quinine, but also, I have to admit, with hunger. If it were possible for a man to jump out of his skin, I’d have done it then, once and for all. There was nothing to hold me back.

Those unlikely midinettes could have wafted me away, sublimated me; a gesture, a word would have sufficed, and in that moment I’d have been transported, all of me, into the world of dreams. But I suppose they had other fish to fry.

I sat there for an hour, two hours, in that state of stupefaction. I had nothing more in the world to hope for.

You know about innards? The trick they play on tramps in the country? They stuff an old wallet with putrid chicken innards. Well, take it from me, a man is just like that, except that he’s fatter and hungrier and can

move around, and inside there's a dream. I had to look at the practical side of things and not dip into my small supply of money right away. I didn't have much. I was even afraid to count it. I couldn't have anyway, because I was seeing double. I could only feel those thin, bashful banknotes through the material of my pocket, side by side with my phony statistics.

Men were passing, too, mostly young ones with faces that seemed to be made of pink wood, with a dry, monotonous expression, and jowls so wide and coarse they were hard to get used to … Well, maybe that was the kind of jowls their womenfolk wanted. The sexes seemed to stay on different sides of the street. The women looked only at the shopwindows, their whole attention was taken by the handbags, scarves, and little silk doodads, displayed very little at a time, but with precision and authority. You didn't see many old people in that crowd. Not many couples either. Nobody seemed to find it strange that I should sit on that bench for hours all by myself, watching the people pass. But all at once the policeman standing like an inkwell in the middle of the street seemed to suspect me of sinister intentions. I could tell.

Wherever you may be, the moment you draw the attention of the authorities, the best thing you can do is disappear in a hurry. Don't try to explain. Sink into the earth! I said to myself. It so happened that just to one side of my bench there was a big hole in the sidewalk, something like the Metro at home. That hole seemed propitious, so vast, with a stairway all of pink marble inside it. I'd seen quite a few people from the street disappear into it and come out again. It was in that underground vault that they answered the call of nature. I caught on right away. The hall where the business was done was likewise of marble. A kind of swimming pool, but drained of all its water, a fetid swimming pool, filled only with filtered, moribund light, which fell on the forms of unbuttoned men surrounded by their smells, red in the face from the effect of expelling their stinking feces with barbarous noises in front of everybody.

Men among men, all free and easy, they laughed and joked and cheered one another on, it made me think of a football game. The first thing you did when you got there was to take off your jacket, as if in preparation for strenuous exercise. This was a rite and shirtsleeves were the uniform.

In that state of undress, belching and worse, gesticulating like lunatics, they settled down in the fecal grotto. The new arrivals were assailed with a thousand revolting jokes while descending the stairs from the street, but they all seemed delighted. The morose aloofness of the men on the street above was equaled only by the air of liberation and rejoicing that came over them at the prospect of emptying their bowels in tumultuous company.

The splotched and spotted doors to the cabins hung loose, wrenched from their hinges. Some customers went from one cell to another for a little chat, those waiting for an empty seat smoked heavy cigars and slapped the backs of the obstinately toiling occupants, who sat there straining with their heads between their hands. Some groaned like wounded men or women in labor. The constipated were threatened with ingenious tortures. When a gush of water announced a vacancy, the clamor around the free compartment redoubled, and as often as not a coin would be tossed for its possession. No sooner read, newspapers, though as thick as pillows, were dismembered by the horde of rectal toilers. The smoke made it hard to distinguish faces, and the smells deterred me from going too close.

To a foreigner the contrast was disconcerting. Such free-and-easy intimacy, such extraordinary intestinal familiarity, and up on the street such perfect restraint. It left me stunned.

I returned to the light of day by the same stairway and went back to the same bench to rest. Sudden outburst of digestive vulgarity. Discovery of a joyous shitting communism. I ignored both these disconcerting aspects of the same adventure. I hadn't the strength for analysis or synthesis. My pressing desire was to sleep. O rare, delicious frenzy!

So I joined the line of pedestrians entering one of the neighboring streets. We progressed by fits and starts because of the shopwindows, which fragmented the crowd. At one point, the door of a hotel created a great eddy. People poured out on to the sidewalk through a big revolving door. I was caught up and poured the other way, into the big lobby inside. Instant amazement … You had to divine, to imagine the majesty of the edifice, the generous proportions, because the lights were so veiled that it took you some time to know what you were looking at.

Lots of young women in the half-light, plunged in deep armchairs as in jewel cases. Around them attentive men, moving silently, with timid curiosity, to and fro, just offshore from the row of crossed legs and magnificent silk-encased thighs. Those miraculous beings seemed to be waiting for grave and costly events. Obviously they weren't giving me a thought. So, ever so furtively, I in my turn passed that long and palpable temptation. Since at least a hundred of those divine leg owners were sitting in a single row of chairs, I reached the reception desk in so dreamy a condition, having absorbed a ration of beauty so much too strong for my

constitution that I was reeling.

At the desk, a pomaded clerk violently offered me a room. I asked for the smallest in the hotel. I can't have had more than fifty dollars at the time. Also, I was pretty well out of ideas and self-assurance.

I hoped the room the clerk was giving me was really the smallest, because his hotel, the Laugh Calvin, was advertised as the most luxurious and sumptuously furnished on the whole North American continent!

Over my head, what an infinity of furnished rooms! And all around me, in those chairs, what inducements to multiple rape! What abysses! What perils! Is the poor man's aesthetic torment to have no end? Is it to be even more long-lasting than his hunger? But there was no time to succumb; before I knew it, the clerk had thrust a heavy key into my hand. I was afraid to move.

A sharp youngster, dressed like a juvenile brigadier general, stepped, imperious and commanding, out of the gloom. The smooth reception clerk rang his metallic bell three times, and the little boy started whistling. That was my send-off. Time to go. And away we went.

As black and resolute as a subway train, we raced down a corridor. The youngster in the lead. A twist, a turn, another. We didn't dawdle. We veered a bit to the left. Here we go. The elevator. Stitch in my side. Is this it? No. Another corridor.

Even darker. Ebony paneling, it looks like, all along the walls. No time to examine it. The kid's whistling. He's carrying my frail valise. I don't dare ask him questions. My job was to keep walking, that was clear to me. In the darkness here and there, as we passed, a red-andgreen light flashed a command. Long lines of gold marked the doors. We had passed the 1800s long ago and then the 3000s, and still we were on our way, drawn by our invincible destiny. As though driven by instinct, the little bellhop in his braid and stripes pursued the Nameless in the darkness. Nothing in this cavern seemed to take him unawares. His whistling modulated plaintively when we passed a black man and a black chambermaid. And that was all.

Struggling to walk faster in those corridors, I lost what little self-assurance I had left when I escaped from quarantine. I was falling apart, just as I had seen my shack fall apart in the African wind and the floods of warm water. Here I was attacked by a torrent of unfamiliar sensations. There's a moment between two brands of humanity when you find yourself thrashing around in a vacuum.

Suddenly, without warning, the youngster pivoted. We had arrived. I bumped into a chair, it was my room, a big box with ebony walls. The only light was a faint ring surrounding the bashful greenish lamp on the table. The manager of the Laugh Calvin Hotel begged the visitor to look upon him as a friend and assured him that he, the manager, would make a special point of keeping him, the visitor, cheerful throughout his stay in New York. Reading this notice, which was displayed where no one could possibly miss it, added if possible to my depression.

Once I was left alone, it deepened. All America had followed me to my room, and was asking me enormous questions, reviving awful forebodings.

Reclining anxiously on the bed, I tried to adjust to the darkness of my cubbyhole. At regular intervals the walls on the window side trembled. An Elevated Railway train was passing. It bounded between two streets like a cannonball filled with quivering flesh, jolting from section to section of this lunatic city. You could see it far away, its carcass trembling as it passed over a torrent of steel girders, which went on echoing from rampart to rampart long after the train had roared by at seventy miles an hour. Dinnertime passed as I lay thus prostrate, and bedtime as well.

What had horrified me most of all was that Elevated Railway.

On the other side of the court, which was more like a well shaft, the wall began to light up, first one, then two rooms, then dozens. I could see what was going on in some of them. Couples going to bed. These Americans seemed as worn out as our own people after their vertical hours. The women had very full, very pale thighs, at least the ones I was able to get a good look at. Before going to bed, most of the men shaved without taking the cigars out of their mouths.

In bed they first took off their glasses, then put their false teeth in a glass of water, which they left in evidence. Same as in the street, the sexes didn't seem to talk to each other. They impressed me as fat, docile animals, used to being bored. In all, I only saw two couples engaging, with the light on, in the kind of thing I'd expected, and not at all violently. The other women ate chocolates in bed, while waiting for their husbands to finish shaving. And then they all put their lights out.

There's something sad about people going to bed. You can see they don't give a damn whether they're getting what they want out of life or not, you can see they don't even try to understand what we're here for. They just don't care. Americans or not, they sleep no matter what, they're bloated mollusks, no sensibility, no trouble with their conscience. I'd seen too many puzzling things to be easy in my mind. I knew too much and not enough. I'd better go out, I said to myself, I'd better go out again. Maybe I'll meet Robinson. Naturally that was an idiotic idea, but I dreamed it up as an excuse for going out again, because no matter how much I tossed and turned on my narrow bed, I couldn't snatch the tiniest scrap of sleep. Even masturbation, at times like that, provides neither comfort nor entertainment. Then you're really in despair.

The worst part is wondering how you'll find the strength tomorrow to go on doing what you did today and have been doing for much too long, where you'll find the strength for all that stupid running around, those projects that come to nothing, those attempts to escape from crushing necessity, which always founder and serve only to convince you one more time that destiny is implacable, that every night will find you down and out, crushed by the dread of more and more sordid and insecure tomorrows.

And maybe it's treacherous old age coming on, threatening the worst. Not much music left inside us for life to dance to. Our youth has gone to the ends of the earth to die in the silence of the truth. And where, I ask you, can a man escape to, when he hasn't enough madness left inside him? The truth is an endless death agony. The truth is death. You have to choose: death or lies. I've never been able to kill myself.

I'd better go out into the street, a partial suicide. Everyone has his little knacks, his ways of getting sleep and food. I'd need to sleep if I wanted to recover the strength I'd need to go to work next day. Get back the zip it would take to find a job in the morning, and in the meantime force my way into the unknown realm of sleep. Don't go thinking it's easy to fall asleep when you've started doubting everything, mostly because of the awful fears people have given you.

I dressed and somehow found my way to the elevator, but feeling kind of foggy. I still had to cross the lobby, to pass more rows of ravishing enigmas with legs so tempting, faces so delicate and severe. Goddesses, in short, hustling goddesses. We might have tried to make an arrangement. But I was afraid of being arrested. Complications. Nearly all a poor bastard's desires are punishable by jail. So there I was on the street again. It wasn't the same crowd as before. This one billowed over the sidewalks and showed a little more life, as if it had landed in a country less arid, the land of entertainment, of night life. The people surged in the direction of lights suspended far off in the darkness, writhing multicolored snakes. They flowed in from all the neighboring streets. A crowd like that, I said to myself, adds up to a lot of dollars in handkerchiefs alone or silk stockings! Or just in cigarettes for that matter! And to think that you can go out among all that money, and nobody'll give you a single penny, not even to go and eat with! It's heartbreaking to think how people shut themselves off from one another, like houses.

I, too, dragged myself toward the lights, a movie house, and then another right next to it, and another, all along the street. We lost big chunks of crowd to each of them. I picked a movie house with posters of women in slips, and what legs! Boyohboy! Heavy! Ample!

Shapely! And pretty faces on top, as though drawn for the contrast, no need of retouching, not a blemish, not a flaw, perfect I tell you, delicate but firm and concise. Life can engender no greater peril than these incautious beauties, these indiscreet variations on perfect divine harmony.

It was warm and cozy in the movie house. An enormous organ, as mellow as in a cathedral, a heated cathedral I mean, organ pipes like thighs. They don't waste a moment. Before you know it, you're bathing in an all-forgiving warmth. Just let yourself go and you'll begin to think the world has been converted to loving-kindness. I almost was myself. Dreams rise in the darkness and catch fire from the mirage of moving light. What happens on the screen isn't quite real; it leaves open a vague cloudy space for the poor, for dreams and the dead. Hurry hurry, cram yourself full of dreams to carry you through the life that's waiting for you outside, when you leave here, to help you last a few days more in that nightmare of things and people. Among the dreams, choose the ones most likely to warm your soul. I have to confess that I picked the sexy ones. No point in being proud; when it comes to miracles, take the ones that will stay with you. A blonde with unforgettable tits and shoulders saw fit to break the silence of the screen with a song about her loneliness. I'd have been glad to cry about it with her.

There's nothing like it! What a lift it gives you! After that, I knew I'd have courage enough in my guts to last me at least two days. I didn't even wait for the lights to go on. Once I'd absorbed a small dose of that admirable ecstasy, I knew Yd sleep, my mind was made up. When I got back to the Laugh Calvin, the night clerk, despite my greeting, neglected to say good evening the way they do at home. But his contempt didn't mean a thing to me anymore. An intense inner life suffices to itself, it can melt an icepack that has been building up for twenty years. That's a fact.

In my room I'd barely closed my eyes when the blonde from the movie house came along and sang her whole song of sorrow just for me. I helped her put me to sleep, so to speak, and succeeded pretty well … I wasn't entirely alone … It's not possible to sleep alone …

13

To eat cheaply in America, you can buy yourself a hot roll with a sausage in it, it's handy, they sell them on street corners in the poor neighborhoods, and they're not at all expensive. I didn't mind eating in poor neighborhoods, but never meeting those splendid creatures designed for the rich, that bothered me. Under those conditions it wasn't worth eating. True, at the Laugh Calvin, on those thick carpets, I could pretend to be looking for somebody among the too pretty women in the lobby. After a while I was able to face that sultry atmosphere without quailing. Thinking about it, I had to admit that the boys on the *Infanta Combitta* had been right; experience was teaching me that I didn't have sensible tastes for a poor slob. My shipmates on the galley had been right in giving me hell. Anyway, my morale was still low. More and more I dosed myself on movies, in this street or that street, but all they gave me was enough energy for a little stroll or two. No more. The loneliness in Africa had been pretty rough, but my isolation in this American anthill was even more crushing.

I'd always worried about being practically empty, about having no serious reason for living. And now, confronted with the facts, I was sure of my individual nullity. In that environment, too different from the one where my petty habits were at home, I seem to have disintegrated, I felt very close to nonexistence. I discovered that with no one to speak to me of familiar things, there was nothing to stop me from sinking into irresistible boredom, a terrifying, sickly sweet torpor. Nauseating.

On the point of dropping my last dollar in this adventure, I was still bored. So profoundly that I even refused to envisage the most urgent steps I should have been taking. We are so trivial by nature that only amusements can stop us from dying for real. I clung to the movies with desperate fervor.

Leaving the delirious gloom of my hotel, I attempted a few excursions in the main streets round about, an insipid carnival of dizzy buildings. My weariness increased at the sight of those endless house fronts, that turgid monotony of pavements, of windows upon windows, of business and more business, that chancre of the world, bursting with pustulent advertisements. False promises. Driveling lies.

Along the river I explored other streets, more and more of them. Here the dimensions were more normal; for instance, from the sidewalk where I was standing I might have smashed every window in the house across the street.

Those neighborhoods were full of the smell of constant frying, the shops dispensed with sidewalk displays for fear of theft. Everything reminded me of the streets around my hospital in Villejuif, even the children with their crooked swollen knees all along the sidewalks, and the barrel organs. I'd have been glad to stay there with them, but poor people wouldn't have fed me any more than the rich; besides, I'd have had to look at them all, and their too much misery frightened me. So I finally went back to Richtown. "You nogood!" I said to myself. "Really, you have no virtue!" A man should be resigned to knowing himself a little better each day if he hasn't got the guts to put an end to his sniveling once and for all.

A streetcar was running beside the Hudson, heading for the midtown section, an ancient vehicle, trembling in every wheel and all its terrified carcass. It took a solid hour to get there. The passengers submitted without impatience to a complicated ritual, you paid by tossing coins into a kind of coffee mill stationed at the entrance. The conductor, dressed like ours, in the uniform of a Balkan prisoner of war, watched them doing it. At last we arrived. Returning exhausted from those populist excursions, I once again passed that inexhaustible double row of beauties in my Tantalian lobby. Again and again I passed, pensive and prodded by desire.

My poverty was such that I didn't dare rummage through my pockets to make sure. If only, I thought, Lola hasn't picked this particular moment to leave town … But will she want to see me in the first place? Should I touch her for fifty or for a hundred dollars as a starter? … I hesitated. I felt that I wouldn't have the nerve till I'd eaten and slept properly for once. And then, if this first touch was successful, I'd go looking for Robinson right away, that is, as soon as I got my strength back. Robinson was nothing like me. He was determined!

Courageous! Oh yes! I could bet he knew all about America by now, all the ins and outs!

Maybe he knew some way of acquiring the certainty, the peace of mind, in which I was so sadly lacking …

If, as I supposed, he too had come on a galley and trodden these shores before me, he'd be well launched on his American career by now. These jumpy lunatics wouldn't faze him! I myself, come to think of it, might have looked for a job in one of those offices, whose dazzling signs I saw outside … But at the thought of having to enter that sort of building I crumpled with fear. My hotel, that gigantic, loathsomely animated tomb, was enough for me.

Maybe those vast accretions of matter, those commercial honeycombs, those endless figments of brick and steel didn't affect the habitues the way they did me. To them perhaps that suspended deluge meant security, while to me it was simply an abominable system of constraints, of corridors, locks and wickets, a vast, inexpiable architectural crime. Philosophizing is simply one way of being afraid, a cowardly pretense that doesn't get you anywhere.

I went out and watched my last three dollars wriggling in the palm of my hand under the electric signs on Times Square, that amazing intersection where the crowds engaged in picking their movie show are bathed in floods of advertising. In search of a cheap restaurant, I went into one of those rationalized public refectories, where the service is reduced to a minimum and the alimentary rite is cut down to the exact measure of nature's requirements.

They hand you a tray at the entrance, and you take your place in a line. You wait. The girls around me, delightful candidates for dinner, didn't say a word to me … It must feel really funny, I thought, to be able to go right up to one of those young ladies with the tidy, prettily shaped noses, and say: "Miss, I'm rich, very rich … just tell me what it might please you to accept …"

Everything that was so complicated a moment before would suddenly become so simple, so divinely simple … Everything would be changed, the forbiddingly hostile world would turn into a playful, docile, velvety ball, rolling at your feet. Then and there, perhaps, you'd throw off the exhausting habit of dreaming about successful people and enormous fortunes, because then you'd be able to put your hands on all that. The life of people without resources is nothing but one long rebuff and one long frenzy of desire, and a man can truly know, truly deliver himself only from what he possesses. As for me, I'd picked up and dropped so many dreams, my mind was cracked and fissured, full of drafts and disgustingly out of order.

In the meantime I was afraid to attempt even the most inoffensive conversation with these young things in the restaurant. I went ahead with my tray in well-behaved silence. When it came my turn to pass the earthenware hollows filled with sausages and beans, I took what was given me. That restaurant was so clean and well lighted that, skimming its mosaic floor, I felt like a fly on milk.

Waitresses dressed like nurses stood behind the noodles, rice, and stewed fruit. Each had her specialty. I took what the most attractive ones were dishing out. To my regret, they didn't smile at the customers at all. As soon as you were served, you had to leave your place in line and find yourself a table. You balance your tray and take little mincing steps as if it were an operating room. It was a change from the Laugh Calvin and my gold-bordered ebony cubbyhole.

But if they showered the customers with so much light, if they lifted us for a moment from the habitual darkness of our condition, there was method in their madness. The owner was up to something. I had my suspicions. After days of darkness it feels very strange to be suddenly bathed in torrents of light. It made me a little giddier than usual. Which wasn't difficult, I admit.

I couldn't manage to hide my feet under the immaculate little enamel-topped table I had landed at; they stuck out in all directions. I'd have liked my feet to be somewhere else, because we were being watched through the window by the line of people we had just left in the street. They were waiting for us to finish eating so they could come and take our tables. Actually that was the reason, to keep up their appetite, why we were so well lighted and displayed so prominently; we were living advertisements, so to speak. The strawberries on my cake shimmered and sparkled so brightly that I couldn't bring myself to eat them. You can't get away from American business enterprise.

Yet despite the dazzling glare and my cramped posture I perceived the comings and goings in my immediate vicinity of a very nice waitress and decided not to miss a single one of her delightful movements.

When my turn came to have her clear my table, I took careful note of the unusual shape of her eyes, the outer ends of which tilted upwards more sharply than is common among French women. The eyelids also inclined slightly toward the eyebrows on the temple side. A sign of cruelty, but just enough, the kind of cruelty you can kiss, an insidious tartness like the Rhine wines one can't help liking.

When she came close to me, I made little gestures of complicity, as if I knew her. She looked me over as if I'd been an animal, without indulgence but with a certain curiosity.

"This," I said to myself, "is the first American woman who has been forced to look at me." Once I'd finished my luminous cake, there was no help for it, I had to give up my place to someone else. Reeling slightly, instead of taking the obvious way to the exit, I braced myself and circled round the man at the cash desk who was waiting for all of us and our money. Sticking out like a sore thumb in the bright, disciplined light, I

headed for the blonde.

The twenty-five waitresses at their posts behind the simmering dishes all signaled to me in unison that I was mistaken, headed the wrong way. In the plate-glass window I saw a great stir among the people waiting, and the people behind me, who were supposed to start eating, hesitated to sit down. I had broken the foreordained order of things. All the people around me cried out in consternation: “It must be a foreigner!” But I had my idea for what it was worth, I wasn’t going to lose the beauty who had waited on me. The sweet thing had asked for it, she had looked at me. I was sick of being alone. I was sick of dreams. I wanted sympathy! Human contact! “Miss,” I said, “you hardly know me. But I already love you. Shall we get married? …” That’s how I addressed her, most respectfully.

Her answer never reached me, for a giant guard, he too dressed all in white, stepped up at that exact moment and simply shoved me out into the night, without insults or brutality, like a dog that has misbehaved.

The whole thing went off like clockwork, there was nothing I could say. I went back to the Laugh Calvin.

In my room the same thunders were still shattering their echoes, first the roar of the “El,” which seemed to hurl itself at us from far away, smashing the city every time it passed by carrying away the aqueducts; and, in between, incoherent, mechanical sounds from far below, coming up from the street, plus the soft murmur of the eddying crowd, hesitant, monotonous, always starting up again, then hesitating again and starting up again. The great stewpot of people in a city.

From up high where I was, you could shout anything you liked at them. I tried. They made me sick, the whole lot of them. I hadn’t the nerve to tell them so in the daytime, to their face, but up there it was safe. “Help! Help!” I shouted, just to see if it would have any effect on them. None whatsoever. Those people were pushing life and night and day in front of them. Life hides everything from people. Their own noise prevents them from hearing anything else. They couldn’t care less. The bigger and taller the city, the less they care. Take it from me. I’ve tried. It’s a waste of time.

I have to admit it was only for need of money, but how very pressing, how imperious a need! that I started looking for Lola. If it hadn’t been for that pitiful need, man! would I have let that little bitch of a girlfriend grow old and die without ever setting eyes on her again! All in all?and when I thought about it I had no doubt whatsoever?her behavior to me had been most crummily ruthless.

When, grown older, we look back on the selfishness of the people who’ve been mixed up with our lives, we see it undeniably for what it was, as hard as steel or platinum and a lot more durable than time itself.

As long as we’re young, we manage to find excuses for the stoniest indifference, the most blatant caddishness, we put them down to emotional eccentricity or some sort of romantic inexperience. But later on, when life shows us how much cunning, cruelty, and malice are required just to keep the body at ninety-eight point six, we catch on, we know the score, we begin to understand how much swinishness it takes to make up a past. Just take a close look at yourself and the degree of rottenness you’ve come to. There’s no mystery about it, no more room for fairy tales; if you’ve lived this long, it’s because you’ve squashed any poetry you had in you. Life is keeping body and soul together.

I finally, with a good deal of trouble, found my little bitch on the twenty-third floor of a building on 77th Street. It’s incredible how revolting people seem when you’re about to ask a favor of them. Her place was posh, pretty much what I’d imagined.

Having steeped myself in large doses of cinema, I was mentally in pretty good shape, almost out of the depression that had weighed on me ever since I landed in New York, so our first contact wasn’t as unpleasant as I’d expected. Lola didn’t even seem terribly surprised at seeing me, it was only when she recognized me that she seemed rather put out. By way of preamble, I tried to strike up an inoffensive sort of conversation, drawing on our common past. I kept it as discreet as possible and mentioned the war just in passing, without any particular emphasis. There I was putting my foot in it. She didn’t want to hear about the war, not one word. It aged her, and she didn’t like that. She lost no time in getting back at me; age, she said, had so wrinkled, bloated, and caricatured me that she wouldn’t have known me in the street. In short, we exchanged compliments. If the little tart thought she could get me down with such foolishness! I didn’t even deign to react to her sleazy impertinence.

Her furnishings didn’t bowl me over with their elegance, but the place was cheerful enough, or at least I thought so after the Laugh Calvin.

There always seems to be a certain magic about getting rich quickly. Since the rise of Musyne and Madame Herote, I knew that a poor woman’s ass is her gold mine. Those sudden female metamorphoses fascinated me,

and I'd have given Lola's concierge my last dollar to make her talk.

But there was no concierge in the house. There were no concierges in the whole city. A city without concierges has no history, no savor, it's as insipid as a soup without pepper and salt, nondescript slop. O luscious scrapings! O garbage, O muck oozing from bedrooms, kitchens, and attics, cascading down to the concierge's den, the center of life?what luscious, tasty hell-fire! Some of our concierges are victims of their profession, laconic, throatclearing, delectable, struck dumb with amazement, martyrs, stupefied and consumed by the Truth.

To counter the abomination of being poor, why deny it, we are in duty bound to try everything, to get drunk on anything we can, cheap wine, masturbation, movies. No sense in being difficult, "particular" as they say in America. Year in year out, we may as well admit, our concierges in France provide anyone who knows how to take it and coddle it close to his heart with a free-gratis supply of all-purpose hatred, enough to blow up the world. In New York, they're cruelly lacking in this vital spice, so sordid and irrefutably alive, without which the spirit is stifled, condemned to vague slanders and pallid bumbled calumnies. Without a concierge you get nothing that stings, wounds, lacerates, torments, obsesses, and adds without fail to the world's stock of hatred, illumining it with thousands of undeniable details.

What made this lack all the more deplorable was that Lola, surprised in her native environment, inspired me with a new sort of disgust. I longed to pour out my revulsion at the vulgarity of her success, at her trivial, loathsome pride, but how could I? In that same moment, by the workings of an instant contagion, the memory of Musyne became equally hostile and repugnant to me. An intense hatred for those two women arose in me, it's still with me, it has become part and parcel of my being. I'd have needed a whole panoply of evidence to rid myself on time and for good of all present and future indulgence for Lola. We can't live our lives over again.

Courage doesn't consist in forgiveness, we always forgive too much. And it does no good, that's a known fact. Why was "the Housemaid" put in the last row, after all other human beings? Not for nothing, we can be sure of that. One night while they're asleep, all happy people, believe me, ought to be put to sleep for real, that'll be the end of them and their happiness once and for all. The next day they'll all be forgotten, and we'll be free to be as unhappy as we please, along with the Housemaid. But what's all this I'm telling you? Lola was pacing the floor without many clothes on, and in spite of everything her body still struck me as very desirable. Where there's a luxurious body there's always a possibility of rape, of a direct, violent breaking and entering into the heart of wealth and luxury, with no fear of having to return the loot.

Maybe she was just waiting for me to make a move, and then she'd have shown me the door. Anyway, I was careful, mostly because I was so abominably hungry. Eat first!

Besides, she was going on and on about the vulgar trivia of her daily life. The world would certainly have to be shut down for at least two or three generations if there were no more lies to tell. People would have practically nothing to say to one another. She finally got around to asking me what I thought of her America. I owned that I'd become so weakened, so terror-stricken, that almost everyone and almost everything frightened me, and that her country as such terrified me more than all the direct, occult, and unforeseeable menaces I found in it, chiefly because of the enormous indifference toward me which to my way of thinking was its very essence.

I had my living to make, I told her, so I'd soon have to cure myself of my excessive sensibility. In that respect, I admitted, I was very backward, and I assured her that I'd be exceedingly grateful if she could recommend me to some possible employer among her acquaintances … But please, as soon as possible … I'd be quite satisfied with a modest salary … And considerably more of this insipid hogwash … She took my modest but nevertheless indiscreet suggestion pretty badly. Her replies were discouraging from the start. She couldn't think of anyone at all who might give me a job or help me. Naturally that drove us back to talking about life in general and hers in particular. We were still sizing each other up morally and physically when the bell rang. And then, with practically no pause or interval, four women swept into the room, painted, corpulent, middle-aged, muscular, bejeweled, and very free and easy. Lola introduced us very summarily, she was visibly embarrassed and tried to drag them away somewhere, but, thwarting all her efforts, they competed for my attention, telling me everything they knew about Europe. Europe was an old-fashioned garden, full of old-fashioned, erotic, grasping lunatics. They knew all there was to know about the Chabanais and the Invalides.

Personally, I hadn't been to either of those places, the first being too expensive, the second too out of the way. In replying, I was overcome by a blast of automatic patriotism that made me even sillier than usual on such occasions. I told them their city gave me the creeps. An unsuccessful carnival, a nauseating flop, though the people in charge were knocking themselves out to put it over …

While perorating thus artificially and conventionally, I couldn't help realizing that there were other reasons than malaria for my physical prostration and moral depression. There was also the change in habits; once again I was having to get used to new faces in new surroundings and to learn new ways of talking and lying. Laziness is almost as compelling as life. The new farce you're having to play crushes you with its banality, and all in all it takes more cowardice than courage to start all over again. That's what exile, a foreign country is, inexorable perception of existence as it really is, during those long lucid hours, exceptional in the flux of human time, when the ways of the old country abandon you, but the new ways haven't sufficiently stupefied you as yet.

At such moments everything adds to your loathsome distress, forcing you in your weakened state to see things, people, and the future as they are, that is, as skeletons, as nothings, which you will nevertheless have to love, cherish, and defend as if they existed. A different country, different people carrying on rather strangely, the loss of a few little vanities, of a certain pride that has lost its justification, the lie it's based on, its familiar echono more is needed, your head swims, doubt takes hold of you, the infinite opens up just for you, a ridiculously small infinite, and you fall into it …

Travel is the search for this nothing, this bit of intoxication for numbskulls … Lola's four visitors had a good laugh listening to my wild confessions, my little JeanJacques act. They called me all sorts of names that I hardly understood because of their American mispronunciation and oily, indecent way of speaking. Loudmouthed cats. When the Negro servant came in with tea, we all fell silent.

One of the visitors must have had more discernment than the others, for she announced in a loud voice that I was shaking with fever and must be frightfully thirsty. In spite of my shakes, I loved the food that was served. Those sandwiches, I can say without exaggeration, saved my life.

The conversation turned to the relative merits of the Paris brothels, but I didn't bother to join in. The ladies dabbled in various complicated drinks and then, flushed, warmed, and communicative, started talking about "marriages." Busy as I was with the food, I couldn't help realizing in one corner of my mind that these were marriages of a very special kind, matings, I was pretty sure, between juveniles, and that the ladies collected a commission on them.

Lola saw that this talk caught my attention and aroused my curiosity. She gave me a pretty mean look. She had stopped drinking. The American men Lola knew weren't like me, they never showed curiosity. Under her watchful eye I controlled myself with some difficulty. I'd have liked to ask those ladies a hundred questions.

Finally the guests left us, moving heavily, enlivened by drink, sexually stimulated. Bouncing and wriggling, they held forth with a curiously elegant and cynical eroticism. I sensed an Elizabethan something deep down, and I'd have liked to feel its undoubtedly choice and concentrated vibrations at the end of my organ. But much to my regret and increased sadness, I got no more than a presentiment of that biological communion, that vital message so essential for a traveler. Incurable melancholy!

As soon as they had left, Lola made no secret of her exasperation. That intermezzo had really annoyed her. I didn't say a word.

"Those hags!" she cried a few minutes later.

"How did you get to know them?" I asked her.

"I've always known them …"

No inclination to tell me more at the moment.

Judging by their rather arrogant manner toward her, I had the impression that in a certain society these women must have enjoyed greater prestige than Lola, a considerable authority, in fact. I never found out any more about it.

Lola said something about going downtown, but told me I could stay and wait for her and have some more to eat if I was still hungry. Seeing that I'd left the Laugh Calvin without paying my bill and had no intention of going back?for good reason?I was delighted with her suggestion?a few more moments of warmth before going out and facing the street, and oh my aching back! what a street!

As soon as I was alone, I made for the hallway leading to the place the Negro servant had emerged from. We met halfway to the pantry, and I shook hands with him. He trusted me right off and led me to the kitchen, a fine, well-arranged place, much more logical and attractive than the living room.

Right away he started spitting on the beautiful tile floor as only black men know how to spit, abundantly and consummately. As a matter of politeness, I too spat as best I could. That did it, he took me into his confidence. Lola, he informed me, had a yacht on the river, two cars in the garage, a cellar stocked with liquor from all over the world. The Paris department stores sent her their catalogues. That was the story. And he proceeded to repeat the same meager information over and over again. I stopped listening. I dozed beside him, and the past came back to me, the days when Lola had left me in wartime Paris. The chase that sly, glib, lying minx had led me, Musyne, the Argentines, their ships full of meat. Topo, the bedraggled cohorts on the Place Clichy, Robinson, the waves, the sea, poverty, Lola's gleaming white kitchen, her Negro servant. And me sitting there as if I were somebody else. Everything would go on. The war had burned some and warmed others, same as fire tortures you or comforts you, depending on whether you're in it or in front of it. You've got to work the angles, that's all.

It was true what she'd said about my having changed, I couldn't deny it. Life twists you and squashes your face. It had squashed her face too, but less so. It's no joke being poor. Poverty is a giant, it uses your face like a mop to clear away the world's garbage. There's plenty left.

Still, it seemed to me that I'd noticed something new in Lola, moments of depression, of melancholy, gaps in her optimistic stupidity, the moments when a person has to stop and gather the strength to carry his life, his years, a little further, because they've become too heavy for the vitality he has left, his lousy little bit of poetry.

Suddenly the Negro began to jiggle and hop. Something had come over him. I was his new friend, and he was determined to stuff me full of cakes and load me with cigars. Finally, with infinite precautions, he removed a round, leaden object from a drawer.

"The bomb!" he cried furiously. I retreated. *"Liberia! Liberia!"* he shouted exultantly. He put it back where it belonged and spat again, superbly. What emotion! What jubilation!

His laughter, that gut sensation, infected me. Why not? A little thing like that, I said to myself, doesn't mean a thing. When Lola finally got back from her errands, she found us in the living room, plunged in smoke and laughter. She pretended not to notice. The Negro quickly made himself scarce. She took me to her room. I found her sad, pale, and trembling. Where could she have been? It was getting late. The time of day when Americans are at a loss because the pulse of life around them has gone into slow motion. Every second car is back in the garage. It's the time for half-confidences. But to benefit by it you've got to hurry. To put me in the mood she questioned me, but the tone she took when asking certain questions about the life I'd been leading in Europe stuck in my craw. She made it quite clear that she thought me capable of every kind of beastliness. That hypothesis didn't make me angry, it only embarrassed me. She had a good idea that I'd come to ask her for money, and that in itself created a natural animosity between us. Such feelings verge on murder. We stuck to commonplaces, and I did my level best to avoid an out and out quarrel. She asked among other things about my sexual escapades, wanting to know if, somewhere in the course of my bummings around, I hadn't abandoned a child she could adopt. A bug that had got into her. She was obsessed with the idea of adopting a child. She thought rather naively that a tramp like me must have sired clandestine families all over the world. She was rich, she confided, and not having a child to devote herself to was more than she could bear. She had read every available book on child care, especially the ones that go into a lyrical swoon about motherhood, those books that cure you, if you really assimilate them, of all desire to copulate for ever and ever. Every virtue has its contemptible literature.

Since she wanted to sacrifice herself exclusively for a "little creature," I was out of luck. All I had to offer her was a big creature and one who struck her as too disgusting for words. Poverty doesn't draw unless it's properly presented, swathed in imagination. Our conversation languished. "Look, Ferdinand," she finally suggested, "we've had enough talk. I'm going to take you across town to see my little protege. I enjoy looking after him, but his mother drives me crazy …" It was a strange time to be visiting. In the car on the way, we talked about her catastrophic Negro.

"Did he show you his bombs?" she asked. I owned that he had put me through that ordeal.

"He's a maniac, Ferdinand, but not dangerous. He fills his bombs with my old bills … Years ago in Chicago he had his day … He belonged to a dangerous secret society for black emancipation … Horrible people, to judge by what he's told me … The police broke up the gang, but he still has a weakness for bombs … He never puts explosives in them … The spirit of the thing is enough for him … He's really an artist … He'll be a revolutionary as long as he lives. But I keep him, he's an excellent servant. And all things considered, he's probably more honest than the ones who aren't revolutionaries …" And she came back to her adoption mania.

"It's really too bad you haven't a little girl somewhere. A dreamy nature like yours is no good at all for a man,

but it would be fine for a woman …”

The rain poured down, closing the night around our car as it glided over the long band of smooth concrete. Everything was hostile and cold to me, even her hand, which I was holding tight in mine all the same. Everything came between us. We pulled up in front of a house that looked very different from the one we had just left. In an apartment on the second floor a little boy of about ten was waiting for us with his mother. The furniture had pretensions to Louis XV, and the cooking smells of a recent meal were still in the air. The child jumped up on Lola’s lap and kissed her affectionately. The mother also seemed very fond of Lola. While Lola was talking to the child, I managed to take the mother into the next room.

When we came back, the boy was performing for Lola’s benefit a dance step he had just learned at the Conservatory. “He’ll need a few more private lessons,” Lola observed, “then I may introduce him to my friend Vera at the Globe Theater. I wouldn’t be surprised if the child had quite a future ahead of him.” After these kind, encouraging words the mother thanked her tearfully and profusely. At the same time she accepted a small wad of green dollars, which she tucked away in her bosom like a love letter.

“I’d be rather pleased with that little boy,” said Lola, once we were outside, “but I have to put up with the mother at the same time, and I don’t care for mothers who are too sharp for their own good … Besides, the kid is too depraved … That’s not the sort of attachment I want … What I long for is a purely maternal feeling … Do you understand me, Ferdinand?” When it comes to making a living, I can put up with anything, it’s not a matter of intelligence, I just know I have to adapt.

She couldn’t stop talking about her desire for purity. A few streets further on she asked me where I was planning to sleep that night and took a few more steps beside me. I said that if I didn’t get hold of a few dollars I wouldn’t be sleeping anywhere.

“All right,” she said. “Come home with me. I’ll give you a little change, then you can go where you please.”

She was determined to put me out into the night as soon as possible. The usual thing. Always getting shoved out into the night like this, I said to myself, I’m bound to end up somewhere. That’s some consolation. “Chin up, Ferdinand,” I kept saying to myself, to keep up my courage. “What with being chucked out of everywhere, you’re sure to find whatever it is that scares all those bastards so. It must be at the end of the night, and that’s why they’re so dead set against going to the end of the night.” After that it was very cold between us in her car. The streets we passed threatened us with all the armored silence of their infinitely towering stone, with a kind of suspended deluge. A city lurking in ambush, an unpredictable monster, viscous with asphalt and rain. At last we slowed down. Lola went in ahead of me.

“Come up,” she said. “Follow me.”

Her living room again. I wondered how much she’d part with to get this business over with and be rid of me. She took some banknotes out of a small handbag she had left on the table. I heard an enormous rustling of crumpled bills. Great moments! In the whole city there was no other sound. But I was so embarrassed that I asked her?I don’t know why and it was most out of place?for news of her mother whom I had forgotten.

“My mother is ill,” she said, turning around and looking me full in the face.

“Where is she now?”

“In Chicago.”

“What’s wrong with her?”

“Cancer of the liver … I’ve put her in the hands of the finest specialists in town … They’re costing me a fortune, but they’ll save her. They promised.”

More and more details of her mother’s condition in Chicago poured out of her. Her feeling for her mother made for familiarity, and in spite of herself she appealed to me for comfort. I had her where I wanted her.

“And you, Ferdinand, you believe they’ll cure her, don’t you?”

“No,” I said briskly and firmly. “Cancer of the liver is absolutely incurable.” At that she went deathly pale. The bitch, that was the first time I’d ever seen anything disconcert her.

“But Ferdinand, the specialists assured me she’d recover! They guaranteed it! They gave it to me in writing! They’re great doctors, Ferdinand …”

“For cash, Lola, there will always be great doctors … luckily … I’d do the same for you myself if I were in their place … And so would you, Lola …” Suddenly what I was saying struck her as so incontrovertible, so obvious that she couldn’t even put up a fight.

For once, maybe for the first time in her life, she lost her nerve.

“But Ferdinand, don’t you realize how terribly you’re hurting me? … I love my mother, didn’t you know that I love her?”

Glad to hear it! Good grief! Who the hell cares whether she loves her mother or not!

Lola was sobbing in her emptiness.

“Ferdinand, you’re a worthless monster!” she shouted in a rage. “You’re wicked! Wicked!

Saying awful things like that is just your cowardly way of avenging yourself for the rotten situation you’re in … And I just know you’re doing my mother a lot of harm by talking that way!”

In her despair I sniffed vestiges of the Coue method.

Her fury didn’t frighten me as much as that of the officers on the *Admiral Bragueton*, who’d wanted to annihilate me to give the bored ladies a kick.

I watched Lola closely as she was calling me every name in the book, and it gave me a certain feeling of pride to observe that by contrast the more she insulted me the more my indifference, no, my joy, increased. We’re nice people deep down.

“Now,” I figured, “she’ll have to give me at least twenty dollars to get rid of me … Maybe even more …”

I took the offensive: “Lola, lend me the money you promised or I’ll sleep here, and you’ll hear me repeat all I know about cancer, its complications, its hereditary character, because you know, Lola, cancer is hereditary, and don’t forget it!”

As I developed and refined on the details of her mother’s case, I saw Lola blanch, weaken, crumple before my eyes. “Oh, the bitch!” I said to myself. “Keep a good hold on her! For once you’ve got the good end! … Don’t let her off the line! You won’t find such a good one in a hurry! …”

She was beside herself. “Here!” she screamed. “Take it! Take your hundred dollars and get out and never come back, hear, never! … Out! Out! Out! You beast!”

“Won’t you kiss me all the same, Lola … Come on! We’re still friends, aren’t we?” I suggested, to see how far I could go in disgusting her. At that point she took a revolver out of a drawer, and she wasn’t joking. The stairs were good enough for me, I didn’t even ring for the elevator.

That good solid fight restored my taste for work and picked up my morale. The next day I took the train to Detroit., where, I’d been assured, it was easy to get hired and there were lots of little jobs that were well paid and didn’t take too much out of you.

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The passers-by spoke to me the way the sergeant had spoken to me in the forest. “You can’t go wrong,” they said. “Just follow your nose.”

And true enough I saw some big squat buildings all of glass, enormous dollhouses, inside which you could see men moving, but hardly moving, as if they were struggling against something impossible. Was that Ford’s? And then all around me and above me as far as the sky, the heavy, composite, muffled roar of torrents of machines, hard, wheels obstinately turning, grinding, groaning, always on the point of breaking down but never breaking down.

“So this is the place!” I said to myself … “It’s not very promising …” Actually, it was worse than everywhere else. I went closer, up to a door where it was written on a slate that men were wanted.

I wasn’t the only one waiting. One of the men cooling their heels told me he had been there, on the same spot, for two days. The poor sucker had come all the way from Yugoslavia for this job. Another dead beat spoke to me, he said he’d decided to work just for the fun of it?a nut, a phony.

Hardly anybody in that crowd spoke English. They eyed each other distrustfully like animals who had often been beaten. They gave off a smell of urinous crotches, like in the hospital. When they spoke to you, you kept away from their mouths, because in there poor people smell of death.

Rain was falling on our little crowd. The files of men stood compressed under the eaves. People looking for work are very compressible. What he liked at Ford’s, an old Russian in a confiding frame of mind told me, was that they didn’t care who or what they hired. “But watch your step,” he added for my instruction, “don’t get uppity, because if you get uppity they’ll throw you out in two seconds and in two seconds you’ll be replaced by one of those mechanical machines that he always keeps on hand, and it’s no soap if you try to get back!” That Russian spoke good Parisian, because he’d been a taxi driver for years, but then he’d been fired because of some cocaine business in Bezons, and in the end he’d staked his cab in a game of *zanzi* with a fare and lost it.

It was true what he told me, that they took on anybody at all at Ford’s. He hadn’t lied. I had my suspicions, though, because down-and-outers like that tend to be off their rockers. There’s a degree of destitution when the mind doesn’t always stay with the body. It’s too uncomfortable. What’s talking to you is practically a disembodied soul. And a soul isn’t responsible for what it says.

Naturally they stripped us stark naked for a starter. The examination was given in a kind of laboratory. We filed slowly past. “You’re in terrible shape,” said the medical assistant the moment he laid eyes on me, “but it doesn’t matter.”

And me with my worry about being turned down because of my African fevers in case they chanced to palpate my liver! Not at all, they seemed delighted at the cripples and weaklings in our batch.

“For the kind of work you’ll be doing here,” the doctor assured me, “your health is of no importance.”

“Glad to hear it,” I said. “But you know, doctor, I’m an educated man, I even studied medicine at one time …”

At that he gave me a dirty look, I saw that I’d put my foot in it again, to my detriment.

“Your studies won’t do you a bit of good around here, son. You’re not here to think, you’re here to make the movements you’re told to. We don’t need imaginative types in our factory. What we need is chimpanzees … Let me give you a piece of advice. Never mention your intelligence again! We’ll think for you, my boy! A word to the wise.” Lucky for me that he warned me. It was just as well that I should know the manners and customs of the house. I’d already made enough stupid blunders to last me at least ten years. From then on I was determined to pass for a quiet little drudge. When we had our clothes back on, we were sent off in slow-moving files, hesitant groups, in the direction where the stupendous roar of machinery came from. Everything trembled in the enormous building, and we ourselves, from our ears to the soles of our feet, were gathered into this trembling, which came from the windows, the floor, and all the clanking metal, tremors that shook the whole building from top to bottom. We ourselves became machines, our flesh trembled in the furious din, it gripped us around our heads and in our bowels and rose up to the eyes in quick continuous jolts. The further we went, the more of our companions we lost. In leaving them we gave them bright little smiles, as if all this were just lovely. It was no longer possible to speak to them or hear them. Each time three or four of them stopped at a machine.

Still, you resist; it's hard to despise your own substance, you'd like to stop all this, give yourself time to think about it and listen without difficulty to your heartbeat, but it's too late for that. This thing can never stop. This enormous steel box is on a collision course; we, inside it, are whirling madly with the machines and the earth. All together. Along with the thousands of little wheels and the hammers that never strike at the same time, that make noises which shatter one another, some so violent that they release a kind of silence around them, which makes you feel a little better.

The slow-moving little car full of hardware has trouble passing between the machine tools. Gangway! The workers jump aside to let the hysterical thing through. And the clanking fool goes on between the belts and flywheels, bringing the men their ration of servitude. It's sickening to watch the workers bent over their machines, intent on giving them all possible pleasure, calibrating bolts and more bolts, instead of putting an end once for all to this stench of oil, this vapor that burns your throat and attacks your eardrums from inside. It's not shame that makes them bow their heads. You give in to noise as you give in to war. At the machines you let yourself go with the two three ideas that are wobbling about at the top of your head. And that's the end. From then on everything you look at, everything you touch, is hard. And everything you still manage to remember more or less becomes as rigid as iron and loses its savor in your thoughts.

All of a sudden you've become disgustingly old.

All outside life must be done away with, made into steel, into something useful. We didn't love it enough the way it was, that's why. So it has to be made into an object, into something solid. The Regulations say so.

I tried to shout something into the foreman's ear, he grunted like a pig in answer and made motions to show me, very patiently, the simple operation I was to perform forever and ever. My minutes, my hours, like those of the others, all my time, would go into passing linchpins to the blind man next to me, who had been calibrating these same linchpins for years. I did the work very badly from the start. Nobody reprimanded me, but after three days of that first job, I was transferred, already a failure, to pushing the little trolley full of washers that went jolting along from machine to machine. At one machine I left three, at another a dozen, at still another only five. Nobody spoke to me. Existence was reduced to a kind of hesitation between stupor and frenzy. Nothing mattered but the ear-splitting continuity of the machines that commanded all men.

At six o'clock, when everything stops, you carry the noise away in your head. I had enough noise to last me all night, not to mention the smell of oil, as if I'd been given a new nose and a new brain for all time.

By dint of renunciation I became, little by little, a different man … a new Ferdinand. It took several weeks. But then the desire to see people came back to me. Naturally not the factory hands, they were mere echoes and smells of machines like myself, lumps of flesh convulsed with vibrations. I wanted to touch a real body, a pink body made of soft, quiet life.

I didn't know a soul in that city, least of all any women. Finally, after a good deal of trouble, I obtained the vague address of a "house," a clandestine brothel, at the north end of town. On several evenings in a row, after work, I strolled around the neighborhood on reconnaissance. The street was like any other, though maybe a little cleaner than the one where I lived.

I located the house in question, it had a garden around it. To get in, you had to move quickly so the cop on duty nearby wouldn't notice. That was the first place in America where I was received without brutality, amiably in fact, for my five dollars. And what beautiful young women, well rounded, bursting with health and graceful strength, almost as beautiful, come to think of it, as the ones at the Laugh Calvin.

And these, at least, you could come right out and touch, I couldn't help myself. I got to be a regular customer. It used up all my pay. When night came, I needed the erotic promiscuity of those splendid, welcoming creatures to restore my soul. The movies were no longer enough, that mild antidote was powerless to fight the physical horror of the factory. To survive, I needed lecherous tonics, drastic elixirs. In that house I didn't have to pay much, they gave me friendly terms, because I brought the girls a few little refinements from France. Except on Saturday night, then there was no time for refinements, business boomed, and I had to make way for baseball teams on a spree, magnificently vigorous young bruisers, to whom happiness came as easily as breath.

While the baseball teams were at it, I, likewise in high spirits, would sit alone in the kitchen, writing my short stories. I'm sure those athletes' enthusiasm for the ladies of the establishment didn't measure up to my own slightly impotent fervor. Confident in their own strength, those baseball players were blase about physical perfection. Beauty is like drink or comfort, once you get used to it, you stop paying attention.

They visited the brothel mostly to make whoopee. Often they'd end up having terrible fights. The police

would burst in and take them all away in little trucks. Toward Molly, one of the lovely girls there, I soon developed an uncommon feeling of trust, which in frightened people takes the place of love. I remember her kindness as if it were yesterday, and her long, blond, magnificently strong, lithe legs, noble legs. Say what you like, the mark of true aristocracy in humankind is the legs.

We became intimate in body and mind, and took walks around town for a few hours every week. She was comfortably off, since she took in about a hundred dollars a day in the cathouse, while I made barely ten at Ford's. The lovemaking she did for a living didn't tire her in the least. Americans do it like birds.

In the evening, when I'd finished pushing my little delivery wagon around, I'd meet her after dinner and force myself to put on a cheerful face. You've got to be cheerful with women, in the beginning at least. A vague desire came over me to suggest things we could do, but I hadn't the strength. She understood the industrial blues, she was used to factory workers.

One evening, just like that, a propos of nothing, she presented me with fifty dollars. First I looked at her. I didn't dare. I thought about my mother and what she'd have said. And then it came to me that my mother, poor thing, had never given me that much. To please Molly, I went right out with her dollars and bought a lovely tan "four-piece" suit, which was what they were wearing that spring. They had never seen me arrive at the cathouse looking so natty. The madame played her big phonograph just to teach me how to dance. Later Molly and I went to the movies to break in my new suit. She asked me on the way if I was jealous, because the suit made me look sad and so did not wanting to go back to the factory. A new suit always throws you off. She gave my suit passionate little kisses when nobody was looking. I tried to think of something else.

What a woman my Molly was! What generosity! What a body! What fullness of youth! A feast of desires! And then I was worried again. Was this pimping?

To make matters worse, Molly pleaded: "Don't go back to Ford's. Get yourself a little job in an office … as a translator, for instance … That's the thing for you … You like books …" Her advice was kindly given, she wanted me to be happy. For the first time somebody was taking an interest in me, looking at me from the inside so to speak, taking my egoism into account, putting herself in my place, not just judging me from her point of view like everyone else.

If only I had met Molly sooner, when it was still possible to choose one road rather than another. Before that bitch Musyne and that little turd Lola crimped my enthusiasm. But it was too late to start being young again. I didn't believe in it anymore. We grow old so quickly and, what's more, irremediably. You can tell by the way you start loving your misery in spite of yourself. Nature is stronger than we are, no two ways about it. She tries us in one particular mold, and we're never able to throw it off. I had started out as the restless type. Little by little, without realizing it, you begin to take your role and fate seriously, and before you know it, it's too late to change. You're a hundred-percent restless, and it's set that way for good.

Very lovingly Molly tried to keep me with her, to dissuade me … "Life can be just as pleasant here as in Europe, Ferdinand. We won't be unhappy together." And in a sense she was right. "We'll invest our savings … We'll buy a little business … We'll be like other people …" She said that to quiet my scruples. Plans for the future. I agreed with her. I was even rather ashamed of all the trouble she was taking to hold me. I was very fond of her, but I was even fonder of my vice, my mania for running away from everywhere in search of God knows what, driven, I suppose, by stupid pride, by a sense of some sort of superiority.

I was afraid of hurting her. She understood and anticipated my concern. She was so nice that I finally told her about the mania that drove me to clear out of wherever I happened to be. She listened to me for days and days while I held forth, laying myself disgustingly bare, fighting with phantasms and points of pride, and she never lost patience, far from it. She only tried to help me get over my foolish and futile anxiety. She didn't quite get the point of my ravings, but she always took my part against my phantoms or with them, whichever I preferred. She was so gentle and persuasive that I grew accustomed to her kindness and took it almost personally. But I felt that I was beginning to cheat on my so-called destiny, my *raison d'ętre* as I called it, and stopped telling her everything that passed through my mind. I crawled back into myself all alone, just delighted to observe that I was even more miserable than before, because I had brought a new kind of distress and something that resembled true feeling into my solitude.

All that is commonplace. But Molly was gifted with angelic patience and had an unshakable belief in "vocations." For instance, her younger sister at the University of Arizona had been smitten with a craze for photographing birds in their nests and wild animals in their dens. So to enable her to study that astonishing specialty, Molly regularly sent this photographer sister of hers fifty dollars a month.

A really unbounded heart, containing something sublime, convertible into cash and not phony like mine and

so many others. Molly would have liked nothing better than to take a financial interest in my dotty career. Though at times I struck her as pretty well off the beam, she thought my convictions real and not to be discouraged. She offered me an allowance and only asked me to draw up a little budget. I couldn't make up my mind to accept. A last vestige of delicacy prevented me from banking any further, from speculating, on her really too noble and kindly nature. And that's how I deliberately got myself in bad with Providence.

I was so ashamed of myself that I even made a feeble attempt to go back to Ford's. Nothing came of my heroic little gesture. I got as far as the factory gate but at that liminil point I froze. The thought of all those machines whirring as they lay in wait for me demolished my feeble work impulse once and for all.

I stationed myself outside the glass front of the main power plant, that multiform giant which roars as it pumps something or other God knows where and brings it back again through a thousand gleaming pipes as intricate and menacing as lianas. One morning as I stood there in drooling contemplation, my Russian taxi driver came by. "Hey, you old rascal," he says to me. "You've been fired! … It's been three weeks since you showed up … They've already put a machine in your place … I warned you …"

"At least," I said to myself, "that finishes it … No need to come back …" And I beat it back to town. On the way home I dropped in at the Consulate to ask if by any chance they'd had news of a Frenchman by the name of Robinson.

"Oh yes!" said the consuls. "Yes indeed! He's been in here to see us twice, with false papers what's more … Actually he's wanted by the police! Do you know him? …" I let it go at that.

After that I expected to meet Robinson any minute. I felt it in my bones. Molly was as kind and affectionate as ever. Once she felt sure I was planning to go away for good, she was even nicer than before. There was no point in being nice to me. Often on Molly's free afternoons we took trips to the outskirts.

Bare little hills, clumps of birches around tiny little lakes, people here and there reading dingy magazines under a sky heavy with leaden clouds. Molly and I avoided elaborate confessions. She knew the score. She was too sincere to say much about her grief. She knew what went on inside, in her heart, and that was enough for her. We kissed. But I didn't kiss her properly as I should have, on my knees if the truth be known. I was always partly thinking about something else at the same time, about not wasting time and tenderness, as if I wanted to keep them for something magnificent, something sublime, for later, but not for Molly and not for this particular kiss. As if life would carry away everything I longed to know about it, about life in the thick of the night, and hide it from me, while I was expending my passion in kissing Molly, and then I wouldn't have enough left, I'd have lost everything for want of strength, and life?Life, the true mistress of all real men?would have tricked me as it tricks everyone else.

We went back to the crowds, and then I'd leave her outside her house, because the customers would keep her busy all night until early morning. While she was taking care of them, I can't deny I was sad, and my sadness spoke to me so plainly of her that I felt she was with me even more than when she really was. I went to the movies to kill time. After the show, I'd board a streetcar going this way or that way and tour around in the night. After two o'clock flocks of timid passengers would get on, a type you seldom see before or after that hour, always pale and sleepy, in docile groups, bound for the suburbs. With them you could go a long way. Much further than the factories, to vague housing developments, little streets of shapeless bungalows. On pavements sticky with the small rain of dawn the daylight glistened blue. My streetcar companions vanished along with their shadows. They closed their eyes on the day. It was hard to make those specters talk. Too tired. They didn't complain, not at all, they were the men who cleaned stores and more stores during the night, and all the offices in the city, after closing time. They didn't seem as anxious as we day people. Maybe because they'd sunk to the very bottom of things. One of those nights when I'd taken still another streetcar and we'd got to the last stop and everybody was quietly getting off, I thought I heard someone calling me by name:

"Ferdinand! Hey, Ferdinand!" Naturally it sounded outrageous in that dim light, I didn't like it. Above the rooftops the sky was coming back in cold little patches, cut out by the eaves. Sure enough, someone was calling me. I turned around and instantly recognized Leon. He came over to me, speaking in a whisper, and we filled each other in. He'd been cleaning an office like the rest of them. That was as much of a gimmick as he'd managed to find. He walked heavily, with a certain true majesty, as if he had been doing dangerous and in a way sacred things in the city. Actually I'd noticed that all those night cleaners had that look. In fatigue and solitude men emanate the divine. His eyes were also full of it when, in the bluish half-light where we were standing, he opened them wider than eyes usually open. He, too, had cleaned endless rows of toilets and made whole mountains of silent offices sparkle.

"Ferdinand," he said. "I recognized you right away. By the way you got into the car … By the sad look on

your face when you saw there were no women on board. Am I right? Isn't that your style?" He was right, it was my style. Unquestionably, my soul was as obscene as an open fly. So his observation was apt and nothing to be surprised at. What I hadn't expected was that he too was a failure in America. That came as a surprise. I told him about the galley at San Tapeta. But he didn't know what I was talking about.

"You're delirious!" he said simply. He'd come over on a freighter. He'd have tried for a job at Ford's, but his papers were just too phony, he wouldn't have dared show them. "They're barely good enough to keep in my pocket," he said. For cleaning offices they didn't much care who you were. They didn't pay much either, but they looked the other way … This night work was a kind of Foreign Legion,

"What about you?" he asked me then. "What are you doing? You still cracked? Still chasing rainbows? Still got the travel bug?"

"I want to go back to France," I said. "I've seen enough, you're right …"

"Best thing you can do," he said. "For us the jig is up … We've aged without noticing it, I know … I'd like to go home too, but there's still this trouble with my papers … I'll wait a while and try and get hold of some good ones … I can't complain about the work I'm doing … There's worse. But I'm not learning English … Some of the guys have been at it for thirty years and all they've learned is 'Exit,' because it's written on the doors they polish, and 'Lavatory.' You get the drift?"

I got the drift. If Molly should ever fail me, I'd have to go into night work myself. No reason why that should ever stop.

The fact is that when you're at war you say peace will be better, you bite into that hope as if it were a chocolate bar, but it's only shit after all. You don't dare say so at first for fear of making people mad. You try to be nice. When you're good and sick of wallowing in muck you speak up. Then everybody thinks you were raised in a barn. And there you have it. I met Robinson two or three times after that. He wasn't looking at all well. A French deserter, who made bootleg liquor for the gangsters of Detroit, let him occupy a corner of his shop. The business tempted Robinson. "I'd make a little rotgut for those bastards to pour down their throats," he confided, "but you know, I've lost my nerve … The first going-over a cop gave me, I know I'd fold up … I've been through too much … Besides, I'm sleepy all the time … Not to mention the dust in those offices, my lungs are full of it … See what I mean? It wears you down …"

We arranged to meet another night. I went back to Molly and told her the whole story. She tried not to show how bad I was making her feel, but it wasn't hard to see she was miserable. I kissed her more often now, but her unhappiness was deep, more real than in other people, because most of us tend to talk as if things were worse than they are. American women are different. We're afraid to understand, to admit it. It's rather humiliating, but this is real unhappiness, not pride, not jealousy, there are no scenes, it's genuine heartbreak. We may as well admit that we haven't got it in us and that when it comes to the pleasure of being really unhappy we're bone dry. We're ashamed of not being richer in heart and everything else, and also of having judged humanity worse than it really is.

Now and then Molly would let go and say something mildly reproachful, but it was always said gently and kindly.

"You're sweet, Ferdinand," she'd say. "I know you try hard not to be as beastly as other people, but sometimes I wonder if you really know what you want. Think it over. You'll have to find a way of earning your living when you get back there, Ferdinand … You won't be able to roam around all night dreaming the way you do here … the way you enjoy so much … while I'm working … Have you thought of that, Ferdinand?" In a way she was dead right, but I couldn't help being the way I was. I was afraid of hurting her. She was so easy to hurt.

"Believe me, Molly, I love you, I always will … as best I can … in my own way." My own way didn't amount to much. And yet Molly had a perfect body, she was very tempting. But I had that lousy weakness for phantoms. Maybe I wasn't entirely to blame. Life forces you to spend too much of your time with phantoms.

"You're very affectionate, Ferdinand," she reassured me. "Don't worry about me … You've got this sickness … always wanting to know more and more … That's all … Anyway, you have to live your own life … Out there, all alone … You'll go further traveling alone … Will you be leaving soon?"

"Yes, I'll finish medical school in France, and then I'll come back," I had the gall to assure her.

"No, Ferdinand, you won't be back … And I won't be here either …" She was nobody's fool.

It came time for me to go. One evening shortly before she'd have to start working, we went to the station. I'd said good-bye to Robinson during the day. He wasn't happy either to see me go. I was always leaving people. On the station platform, while we were waiting for the train, some men passed, they pretended not to know her, but they exchanged whispers.

"You're already far away, Ferdinand. You're doing exactly what you want, aren't you?

That's the main thing. It's the only thing that counts …"

The train pulled in. I wasn't so sure of my plans once I saw the engine. I kissed Molly with all the spirit I had left … I was sad for once, really sad, for everybody, for myself, for her, for everybody.

Maybe that's what we look for all our lives, the worst possible grief, to make us truly ourselves before we die.

Years have passed since I left her, years and more years … I wrote many times to Detroit and all the other addresses I remembered, where I thought she might be known. I never received an answer.

The house is closed now. That's all I've been able to find out. Good, admirable Molly, if ever she reads these lines in some place I never heard of, I want her to know that my feelings for her haven't changed, that I still love her and always will in my own way, that she can come here any time she pleases and share my bread and furtive destiny. If she's no longer beautiful, hell, that's all right too! We'll manage. I've kept so much of her beauty in me, so living and so warm, that I've plenty for both of us, to last at least twenty years, the rest of our lives.

To leave her I certainly had to be mad, and in a cold, disgusting way. Still, I've kept my soul in one place up to now, and if death were to come and take me tomorrow, I'm sure I wouldn't be quite as cold, as ugly, as heavy as other men, and it's thanks to the kindness and the dream that Molly gave me during my few months in America.

15

Getting back from the Other World isn't the half of it. You pick up the sticky, precarious thread of your days just as you left it dangling. It's waiting for you. For weeks and months I hung around the Place Clichy, where I'd started from, and environs, the Batignolles for instance, doing odd jobs. Ghastly! Under the rain, or in the heat of the cars when June came, that burns your throat and nose, almost like at Ford's. For entertainment I'd watch them pass, people and more people, on their way to the theater or the Bois in the evening.

Always more or less alone in my free time, I'd mull over books and newspapers and all the things I'd seen. I resumed my studies, all the while working for a living, and finally managed to pass my examinations. Science, take it from me, is closely guarded, the Faculty of Medicine is a well-locked cupboard. Plenty of jars and very little jam. But after braving five or six years of academic tribulations I got my degree, a very high-sounding piece of paper. Then I put up my shingle in the suburbs, my sort of place, at La Garenne-Rancy,

right after the Porte Brancion on your way out of Paris.

I had no great opinion of myself and no ambition, all I wanted was a chance to breathe and to eat a little better. I put my name-plate over the door and waited. The neighborhood people came and eyed my name-plate suspiciously. They even went to the police station to ask if I was a real doctor. Yes, they were told. He's filed his diploma, he's a doctor all right. The news spread all over Rancy that a real doctor had set up shop in addition to all the others. "He'll never make a living," my concierge predicted. "There are too many doctors around here already!" She was perfectly right. In the suburbs it's mostly by streetcar that life turns up in the morning. Starting at dawn, whole strings of them would come clanking down the Boulevard Minotaure, carrying loads of dazed citizens to work.

The young ones actually seemed happy about it. They'd cheer the traffic on and cling to the running boards, laughing for all they were worth, the darlings! It's hard to believe. But when you've known the telephone booth of the corner cafe for twenty years, so filthy you always mistake it for the crapper, you lose all desire to joke about serious things and about Rancy in particular. Then you realize where they've put you. These houses are your prison, pissy within, flat facades, their heart belongs to the landlord. You never see him. He wouldn't dare show his face. The bastard sends his agent. Yet the neighborhood people say he's affable enough when you meet him. It doesn't cost him a thing.

The sky in Rancy is the same as in Detroit, a smoky soup that bathes the plain all the way to Levallois. Cast-off buildings bogged down in black muck. From a distance the chimneys, big ones and little ones, look like the fat stakes that rise out of the muck by the seaside. And inside it's us.

You need the courage of a crab at Rancy, especially when you're not as young as you used to be and you know you'll never get away. There at the end of the streetcar line a grimy bridge spans the Seine, that enormous sewer which displays everything that's in it. Along the banks, on Sunday and at night, men climb up on the piles of garbage to take a leak. Flowing water makes men meditative. They urinate with a sense of eternity like sailors. Women never meditate. Seine or no Seine. In the morning the streetcar carries away its crowds to get themselves compressed in the Metro. Seeing them all fleeing in that direction you'd think there must have been some catastrophe at Argenteuil, that the town was on fire. Every day in the gray of dawn it comes over them, whole clusters cling to the doors and handrails. One enormous rout! Yet all they're going to Paris for is a boss, the man who saves you from starvation. The cowards, they're scared to death of losing him, though he makes them sweat for their pittance. For ten years you stink of it, for twenty years and more. It's no bargain.

Plenty of bitching and beefing in the streetcar, just to get into practice. The women gripe even worse than the kids. If they caught somebody without a ticket, they'd stop the whole line. It's true that some of those women are already stinko, especially the ones headed for the market at Saint-Ouen, the semibour-geoises. "How much are the carrots?" they ask long before they get there, to show they've got money to spend.

Compressed like garbage in this tin box, they cross Rancy, stinking good and proper especially in the summer. Passing the fortifications, they threaten one another, they let out one last shout, and then they scatter, the Métro swallows them up, limp suits, discouraged dresses, silk stockings, sour stomachs, dirty feet, dirty socks. Wear-ever collars as stiff as boundary posts, pending abortions, war heroes, all scramble down the coal-tar and carbolic-acid stairs into the black pit, holding their return ticket which all by itself costs as much as two breakfast rolls.

The nagging dread of being fired without ceremony, something (accompanied by a tightlipped reference) that can happen to a tardy worker any time the boss decides to cut down on expenses. Never-dormant recollections of the "Slump," of the last time they were unemployed, of all the newspapers they had to buy for the want

ads, five sous a piece … the waiting in line at employment offices … Such memories can strangle a man, however well protected he may seem in his “all-weather” coat.

The city does a good job of hiding its crowds of dirty feet in those long electric sewers. They won’t rise to the surface again until Sunday. You’d better stay indoors when they emerge. Just one Sunday watching their attempts to amuse themselves will permanently spoil your taste for pleasure. Around the Métro entrance, near the bastions, you catch the endemic, stagnant smell of long drawn-out wars, of spoiled, half-burned villages, aborted revolutions, and bankrupt businesses. For years the ragpickers of the “Fortified Zone”

have been burning the same damp little piles of rubbish in ditches sheltered from the wind. Half-assed barbarians, undone by red wine and fatigue. They take their ruined lungs to the local dispensary instead of pushing the streetcars off the embankment and emptying their bladders in the tollhouse. No blood left in their veins. When the next war comes, they’ll get rich again selling rat skins, cocaine, and corrugated-iron masks. For my practice I had found a small apartment at the edge of the “Zone,” from which I had a good view of the embankment and the workman who’s always standing up top, looking at nothing, with his arm in a big white bandage, the victim of a work accident, who doesn’t know what to do or what to think and hasn’t enough money to buy himself a drink and fill his mind.

Molly had been right, I was beginning to understand her. Study changes a man, puts pride into him. You need it to get to the bottom of life. Without it you just skim the surface. You think you’re in the know, but trifles throw you off. You dream too much. You content yourself with words instead of going deeper. That’s not what you wanted. Intentions, appearances, no more. A man of character can’t content himself with that. Medicine, even if I wasn’t very gifted, had brought me a good deal closer to people, to animals, everything. Now all I had to do was plunge straight into the heart of things. Death is chasing you, you’ve got to hurry, and while you’re looking you’ve got to eat, and keep away from wars. That’s a lot of things to do. It’s no picnic.

In the meantime I wasn’t getting many patients. It takes time to get started, people said to comfort me. At the moment the patient was mostly me.

Nothing, it seemed to me, can be gloomier than La Garenne-Rancy when you’ve got no patients. No doubt about it. You shouldn’t think in a place like that, and I’d come, from the other end of the earth what’s more, precisely to think at my ease. Wasn’t I in luck! Stuck-up simpleton! Black and heavy it came over me … No joke, and it stayed with me. There’s no tyrant like a brain.

Below me lived Bézin, the little junk dealer. Whenever I stopped outside his door he said to me: “You got to choose, doctor! Play the races or drink, it’s one or the other! … You can’t have everything! … I prefer my *apéritif!* I don’t care for gambling …” His favorite *apéritif* was *gentiane-cassis*. Not a bad-natured man ordinarily, but unpleasant after a few drinks … When he went to the Flea Market to stock up, he’d stay away for three days, his “expedition” he called it. They’d bring him back. And then he’d prophesy:

“I can see what the future will be like … An endless sex orgy … With movies in between … You can see how it is already …”

On those occasions he could see even further: “I also see that people will stop drinking … I’ll be the last drinker in the future … I’ve got to hurry … I know my weakness …” Everybody coughed in my street. It keeps you busy. To see the sun you have to climb up to Sacré-Coeur at least, because of the smoke.

From up there you get a beautiful view; then you realize that way down at the bottom of the plain it’s us and the houses we live in. But if you try to pick out any particular place, everything you see is so ugly, so uniformly ugly, that you can’t find it. Still further down it’s always the Seine, winding from bridge to bridge like an elongated blob of phlegm.

When you live in Rancy you don’t even realize how sad you’ve become. You simply stop feeling like doing anything much. What with scrimping and going without this and that, you stop wanting anything.

For months I borrowed money right and left. The people were so poor and so suspicious in my neighborhood that they couldn’t make up their minds to send for me before dark, though I was the cheapest doctor imaginable. I spent nights and nights crossing little moonless courtyards in quest of ten or fifteen francs.

In the morning there was such a beating of carpets the whole street sounded like one big drum.

One morning I met Bébert on the sidewalk; his aunt, the concierge, was out shopping, and he was holding down the lodge for her. He was raising a cloud from the sidewalk with a broom.

Anybody who didn’t raise dust at seven o’clock in the morning in those parts would get himself known all up

and down the street, as an out-and-out pig. Carpet beating was a sign of cleanliness, good housekeeping. Nothing more was needed. Your breath could stink all it liked, no matter. Bebert swallowed all the dust he raised in addition to what was sent down from the upper floors. Still, a few spots of sunlight reached the street, but like inside a church, pale, muffled, mystic.

Bebert had seen me coming, I was the neighborhood doctor who lived near the bus stop. Bébert had the greenish look of an apple that would never get ripe. He was scratching himself, and watching him made me want to scratch too. The fact is I had fleas myself, I'd caught them from patients during the night. They like to jump up on your overcoat, because it's the warmest and dampest place available. You learn that in medical school. Bébert abandoned his carpet to come and say good morning. From every window they watched us talking.

If you've got to love something, you'll be taking less of a chance with children than with grownups, you'll at least have the excuse of hoping they won't turn out as crummy as the rest of us. How are you to know?

I've never been able to forget the infinite little smile of pure affection that danced across his livid face. Enough gaiety to fill the universe.

Few people past twenty preserve any of that affection, the affection of animals. The world isn't what we expected. So our looks change! They change plenty! We made a mistake!

And turned Into a thorough stinker in next to no time! Past twenty it shows in our face! A mistake! Our face is just a mistake.

"Hey, doctor," Bébert sings out. "Is it true that they picked up a guy on the Place des Fętes last night. Throat cut open with a razor. You were on duty, weren't you? Is it true?"

"No, Bébert. I wasn't on duty, it wasn't me, it was Dr. Frolichon …"

"That's too bad, 'cause my aunt said she wished you'd have been on duty and you'd have told her all about it …"

"Maybe next time, Bébert."

"Do they often kill people around here?" Bebert asked.

I passed through the dust, but just then the municipal street sweeper whished past and, whirling up from the gutters, a howling typhoon filled the whole street with new clouds, more dense and stinging than the others. We couldn't see each other anymore. Bébert jumped up and down, sneezing and shouting for joy. His haggard face, his greasy hair, his emaciated monkey legs, the whole of him danced convulsively at the end of his broom. Bébert's aunt came home from shopping, she had already downed a glass or two. I have to add that she sniffed ether now and then, a habit contracted when she was working for a doctor and having such trouble with her wisdom teeth. The only teeth she had left were two in front, but she never failed to brush them. "When you've worked for a doctor like I have, you don't forget your hygiene." She gave medical consultations in the neighborhood, and as far away as Bezons.

I'd have been interested to know if Bébert's aunt ever thought of anything. No, she thought of nothing. She talked enormously without ever thinking. When we were alone with no one listening, she'd touch me for a free consultation. It was flattering in away.

"Bébert, doctor, I have to tell you because you're a doctor, he's a little pig! … He 'touches'

himself! I noticed it two months ago, and I wonder who could have taught him such a filthy habit … I've always brought him up right! … I tell him to stop … but he keeps right on …"

I gave her the classic advice: "Tell him he'll go crazy." Bébert, who'd been listening, wasn't pleased.

"I don't touch myself, it's not true. It's the Gagat kid who suggested …"

"See?" said the aunt. "I suspected as much. The Gagats, you know, the people on the fifth floor … They're all perverts. It seems the grandfather runs after female lion tamers … Really, I ask you, lion tamers … Look, doctor, while you're here, couldn't you prescribe a syrup to make him stop touching himself …"

I followed her to her lodge to write out an antivice prescription for Bébert. I was too easy with everybody, I knew that. Nobody paid me. I treated them all free of charge, mostly out of curiosity. That's a mistake. People avenge themselves for the favors done them. Bébert's aunt took advantage of my lofty disinterestedness. In

fact she imposed on me outrageously. I let things ride. I let them lie to me. I gave them what they wanted. My patients had me in their clutches. Every day they sniveled more, they had me at their mercy. And while they were at it they showed me all the ugliness they kept hidden behind the doors of their souls and exhibited to no one but me. The fee for witnessing such horrors can never be high enough. They slither through your fingers like slimy snakes.

I'll tell you the whole story some day if I live long enough.

"Listen, you scum! Let me do you favors for a few years more. Don't kill me yet. Looking so servile and defenseless; I'll tell the whole story. You'll fade away like the oozing caterpillars in Africa that came into my shack to shit … I'll make you into subtler cowards and skunks than you are, and maybe it'll kill you in the end."

"Is it sweet?" Bébert asked about the medicine.

"Don't make it sweet whatever you do," said the aunt. "For that little creep … He don't deserve to have it sweet, he steals enough sugar from me already. He has every vice, he'll stop at nothing. He'll end up murdering his mother!"

"I haven't got a mother," said Bébert peremptorily. He had his wits about him.

"Damn you!" cried the aunt. "None of your back talk, or I'll give you the cat o'nine tails!" Then and there she takes it down off the hook, but he'd already beat it out into the street.

"Cock-sucker!" he shouted back at her from the corridor. The aunt went red in the face and came back to me. Silence. We changed the subject.

"Maybe, doctor, you ought to go and see the lady on the mezzanine at 4 Rue des Mineures … He used to be a notary's clerk … She's heard about you … I told her what a wonderful doctor you are, so nice to the patients."

I know she's lying. Her favorite doctor is Frolichon. She always recommends him when she can and runs me down at every opportunity. As far as she's concerned, my humanitarianism has earned me an animal hatred. Because, don't forget, she's an animal. Except that this Frolichon she admires makes her pay cash, so she consults me on the run. If she recommends me, this must be a strictly nonpaying patient, or there's something very shady somewhere. As I'm leaving, I remember Bébert,

"You ought to take him out," I said. "The child doesn't get out enough."

"Where do you want us to go? I can't go very far on account of my lodge …"

"Take him to the park at least on Sunday …"

"But there are even more people and more dust in the park than here … It's so crowded." There's some sense in what she says. I try to think of another place to suggest. Diffidently I propose the cemetery.

The cemetery of La Garenne-Rancy is the only open space of any size in the neighborhood with a few trees in it.

"Say, that's a fact, I hadn't thought of that. Maybe we'll go." Bébert had just come in.

"How about it, Bébert? Would you like to go for a walk in the cemetery? I have to ask him, doctor, because I don't mind telling you, he's as stubborn as a mule about taking a *walk* …" Actually, Bébert has no opinion. But the idea appeals to his aunt, and that's enough. She has a weakness for cemeteries, like all Parisians. It looks as if she were about to start thinking. She examines the pros and cons. The fortifications are too low class … The park is definitely too dusty … While the cemetery, sure enough, isn't bad … The people who go there on Sunday are mostly respectable folk who know how to behave … And another thing that makes it really convenient is that on the way back you can shop on the Boulevard de la Liberté, where some of the stores keep open on Sunday.

And she concluded. "Bébert, take the doctor to see Madame Henrouille on the Rue des Mineures … You know where Madame Henrouille lives, don't you, Bébert?" Bébert knew where everything was, if only it gave him a chance to roam around. Between the Rue Ventru and the Place Lénine it's all apartment houses. The contractors have taken over practically all the fields that were left around there, at Les Garennes, as the area was called. There was just a tiny bit of country at the end, a few empty lots after the last gas lamp.

Wedged in between apartment buildings, a few private houses are still holding out, four rooms with a big coal

stove in the downstairs hallway; true, for reasons of thrift, the stove is seldom lit. The dampness makes it smoke. These remaining private houses belong to people who have retired on small incomes … The moment you go in, the smoke makes you cough. The people who've stayed in the neighborhood haven't got big incomes, especially these Henrouilles I was being sent to. They had a little something though. In addition to the smoke, as you stepped in, the Henrouilles' house smelled of the toilet and stew. They'd just finished paying for the place, it represented the savings of at least fifty years. The first time you saw them, you noticed something was wrong and wondered what it was. Well, the unnatural side of the Henrouilles was that for fifty years they had never spent one sou without regretting it. They'd put their flesh and spirit into that house of theirs, like a snail. But the snail doesn't know what he's doing.

The Henrouilles had spent a lifetime acquiring a house, and once it was theirs they couldn't get over it. Like people who've just been dug out of an earthquake, they were flabbergasted. Folks who've just been let out of a dungeon must get a funny look on their faces. The Henrouilles had thought about buying a house even before they were married. First separately, then together. For half a century they had refused to think about anything else, and when life had forced them to think about something else, the war for instance and especially their son, it made them very unhappy.

When as newlyweds they had moved into their house, each with the savings of ten years, it wasn't quite finished and it was still in the middle of the fields. To reach it in winter, they had to put on sabots; they'd leave them at the grocery store on the corner of the Rue de la Révolte in the morning when they set out for work in Paris, three kilometers distant, by horse car, two sous a ticket.

You need a sturdy constitution to get through a whole lifetime on such a schedule. There was a picture of them over the bed on the upper floor, taken on their wedding day. Their bedroom furniture had all been paid for, ages ago in fact. All the receipted bills that had accumulated in the last ten, twenty, forty years, He pinned together in the top bureau drawer, and the account book, fully up to date, is downstairs in the dining room where they never eat. Henrouille will show you all that if you ask him. On Saturdays he balances the accounts in the dining room. They've always eaten in the kitchen.

I learned these things little by little from them and other people and some from Bébert's aunt. When I knew them a little better, they themselves told me about the terror that had haunted them all their lives, the fear that their only son, who was in business, might find himself in difficulties. For thirty years that ugly thought had more or less kept them awake nearly every night. The boy had set himself up in the feather business! The ups and downs of feathers in the last thirty years are almost unimaginable. Perhaps there's no worse, no more unstable business in all the world than feathers.

Some businesses are so shaky that no one would think of borrowing money to put them back on their feet, but there are others where the question of a loan keeps coming up almost constantly. When it occurred to them, even now that the house was paid for, that their son might approach them for a loan, the Henrouilles stood up from their chairs, looked at each other, and went red in the face. What would they do if that happened? They would refuse. Their minds had been made up from the first to turn down all requests for a loan … Because of their principles and so as to have a nest egg waiting for him, a legacy, a house, an inheritance. That was their way of thinking. There was no nonsense about their son, but in business it's so easy to go wrong …

When they asked me for my opinion, it was the same as theirs.

My own mother was in business; her business had never brought us anything but misery, a little bread and a lot of trouble. So naturally I was down on business. I had no difficulty in understanding the perils facing the boy, the risk involved in a loan he might be forced to envisage if hard pressed. I needed no explanations. For fifty years old man Henrouille had been a petty clerk in a notary's office on the Boulevard Sébastopol. He knew how fortunes can go to rack and ruin, and told me some hair-raising stories about it. Beginning with his own father, whose bankruptcy had prevented Henrouille from studying to be a teacher on leaving school and obliged him to go right into clerking. You remember things like that. Well, now that their house was bought and paid for and they didn't owe a single sou, they had nothing to worry about on the security side. They were both sixty-five. Just then Henrouille became aware of a strange ailment, or rather, he'd felt it for a long time but hadn't thought about it because there was still the house to be paid for. Once that was all settled and signed, he began to dwell on his strange trouble?dizzy spells and a whistling as of steam in both ears.

About that time he began buying the newspaper, because then they could afford it. And in the paper he saw an advertisement describing exactly what he felt in his ears. He bought the medicine it recommended, but it didn't do his ailment a bit of good; on the contrary, the whistling seemed to get worse. Maybe just from thinking about it. They finally decided on a visit to the dispensary. "It's high blood pressure," the doctor told them. Those words came as a shock. But his new obsession came at just the right time. He had worried about the house and his son's bills for so many years that they had left a kind of hole in the tissue of fears that had

gripped him body and soul for forty years and raised him to the same pitch of anguished trepidation every time a bill came due. Now that the doctor had spoken of blood pressure, he listened to the pressure beating against his ears from deep inside. He'd get up out of bed to feel his pulse and stand motionless beside his bed, feeling a faint quaver run through his body at every heart beat. All this, he said to himself, was his death. He had always been afraid of life, and now he attached his fear to something different, to death, to his blood pressure, just as for forty years he had attached it to the peril of not being able to finish paying for the house.

He had always been just as unhappy, but now he had quickly to find a good new reason for being unhappy. That's not as easy as it sounds. Just saying: "I'm unhappy" won't do. You've got to prove it, to make absolutely sure. That's all he wanted: to be able to state a good substantial motive for his fear. According to the doctor, his blood pressure was twenty-two. Twenty-two is something. The doctor had taught him to find the way to his own death.

Their son in the feather business hardly ever came to see them. Once or twice around New Year's, no more. There wasn't much point in his coming anymore. His father and mother had nothing left to lend. So he hardly ever turned up.

It took me longer to get to know Madame Henrouille; she had no fears, not even the fear of her own death, which she couldn't conceive of. She only complained of old age, but without really thinking about it, just to be like other people, and about the high cost of living. Their life's labor was behind them. The house was paid for. To speed up the final payments she'd even taken to sewing buttons on waistcoats for one of the department stores. "The amount of buttons you've got to sew on for five francs, you wouldn't believe it!" she'd say. And delivering her work on the bus, she rode second class and things were always happening. One afternoon a woman had bumped into her. Madame Henrouille had given her a piece of her mind. The woman was a foreigner, the first and only foreigner Madame Henrouille had ever spoken to.

The walls of the house had kept good and dry in the old days when there was still air circulating around them, but now that there were tall apartment buildings next door, everything oozed and trickled with humidity, even the curtains had a musty smell. Once the house was really theirs, Madame Henrouille had been all smiles for a whole month, as blissful as a nun after communion. In fact she was the one who had suggested:

"Look, Jules, suppose we buy a newspaper every day, now we can afford it!" Just like that. She had thought of her husband, she had looked at him. But then she looked around her and after a while she thought of his mother, her mother-in-law Henrouille. At that the daughter-in-law went suddenly serious again, the way she had been before they finished paying for the house. That thought brought them back to square one, it meant they would have to go on saving for the old woman, her husband's mother, whom the two of them never mentioned to each other or to anyone outside.

She lived at the far end of the garden with an accumulation of old brooms, old chicken crates, and the shadows of buildings. Her home was a low shed, from which she seldom emerged. Just getting meals in to her was a long complicated business. She wouldn't admit anyone to her antrum, not even her son. She was afraid of being murdered, so she said. When the daughter-in-law thought of embarking on a new course of savings, she first said a few words to her husband to sound him out: Why, for instance, wouldn't they send the old woman to St. Vincent's Convent where the Sisters took care of feeble-minded old women like her. The son said neither yes nor no. He was busy with something else at the moment, those sounds in his ears that never stopped. What with thinking about that abominable whistling and listening to it, he'd convinced himself that it would prevent him from sleeping. And true enough, instead of falling asleep, he'd listen to his whistling, drummings, and hummings?a new torture that kept him busy day and night. He had all those noises inside him.

Little by little, though, his anxiety wore itself out, and there wasn't enough left to keep him busy all by itself. So then he and his wife started going back to the market at Saint-Ouen. Everyone said it was the cheapest for miles around. They'd leave home in the morning, and it took them all day, because of all the figures they added up and the discussions they'd have about the prices of things and the money they might have saved by buying one thing rather than another … Back home at about eleven that night, they'd be seized again by the fear of being murdered. That fear hit them regularly, especially the wife. He was more concerned with the sounds in his ears, he'd cling to them desperately at that hour when the street was perfectly still. "I'll never be able to sleep!" he'd repeat to himself out loud to increase his terror. "You can't imagine!"

But she never tried to understand what he meant, or to imagine why this buzzing in his ears should trouble him so. "You hear me when I speak, don't you?" she'd ask him.

"Yes," he'd say.

“Well, then you’re all right! … And it would make more sense to start thinking about your mother who’s been costing us a fortune what with prices going up every day … And the stink in that shack of hers!”

The cleaning woman came in for three hours a week to do the washing, she was the only visitor they had had for years. She also helped Madame Henrouille to make her bed. Every time they had turned the mattress in the last ten years, Madame Henrouille, wanting it to be repeated all over the neighborhood, had told the cleaning woman in the loudest voice she could manage: “We never keep money in the house!” Just as a precaution, to discourage thieves and prospective murderers.

Before going up to their room together, they would close all the doors and windows with great care, each checking up on the other. Then they’d go out in the garden to make sure the mother-in-law’s lamp was still burning. A sign she was still alive. She consumed quantities of oil. She never put her lamp out. She, too, was afraid of murderers and afraid of her son and daughter-in-law. In all the twenty years she’d been living there she had never opened her windows summer or winter and never let her lamp go out.

Her son kept his mother’s money, a small pension. He took care of it. They left her meals outside the door. They kept her money. Not a bad arrangement. But she complained about the arrangement, and that wasn’t all; she complained about everything. She’d shout through the door at anybody who approached her shack. The daughter-in-law would try to pacify her: “It’s not our fault if you’re getting old. All old people get the same pains …”

“Old yourself! You slattern! You scum! It’s you that’s killing me with your filthy lies!” She denied her age ferociously. And through her door she battled irreconcilably against the evils of the whole world. She rejected the fatalities and compromises of the life outside as a base imposture. She refused all contact with such things, she wouldn’t hear of them. “It’s all a pack of lies!” she’d scream. “You made it up!”

She defended herself bitterly against everything that happened outside her hovel and rejected all temptation to compromise or be reconciled. She was sure that if she opened the door hostile forces would burst in, grab her, and finish her off once and for all.

“They’re sly nowadays!” she would scream. “They have eyes all around their heads and mouths all the way down to their assholes and then some, all to tell lies with … It’s them all over …”

She had the gift of gab, she had picked it up as a girl, peddling bric-a-brac at the Temple Market with her mother … She harked back to the days when the common people hadn’t yet learned to listen to themselves growing old.

“If you won’t give me my money I’m going out to work!” she’d shout at her daughter-inlaw. “Hear, you slut? I’m going out to work, I want to work!”

“But grandmother, you’re not strong enough!”

“Oh! I’m not strong enough! Try and get in here and you’ll see if I’m not strong enough!” So one more time they left her barricaded in her shack. But they were dead set on my seeing the old woman, that’s what I’d come for. It took some doing before she let us in. To tell the truth, I couldn’t quite see what they wanted of me. It was the concierge, Bébert’s aunt, who had told them what a nice doctor I was, so kind and considerate … They asked me if I couldn’t give her some medicine to keep her quiet … But what they (especially the daughter-in-law) wanted even more was for me to get the old woman committed once and for all. After we’d knocked for a good half hour, she suddenly flung the door open, and there she was in front of me with her watery red-rimmed eyes … But there was a look in those eyes that danced merrily over her gray, shrunken cheeks, it caught your attention and made you forget the rest; it gave you a feeling in spite of yourself of lightness and pleasure, a feeling of youth that you tried instinctively to hold on to.

That bright look lit up everything in the darkness around her with a youthful joy, a frail but pure delight that we no longer have at our command. Her voice, which cracked when she screamed, gave her words a cheery ring when she consented to talk like other people, it made her phrases and sentences hop skip and jump as brightly as you please, the way people were able to do with their voices and the things around them in the days when not being able to sing or tell a story properly was looked upon as stupid, shameful, and sick. Age had covered her, like a sturdy old tree, with smiling branches.

Grandma Henrouille was merry; discontented and filthy, but merry. The destitution in which she had lived for more than twenty years had not marked her soul. Her dread, on the contrary, was the outside world, as though cold, horror, and death could come to her only from that direction and not from within. She evidently feared nothing from within, she seemed absolutely sure of her mind, as of something undeniable, acknowledged, and certified, once and for all.

And to think that I had been chasing mine halfway around the world.

They called the old woman “mad”; that’s easy to say. She hadn’t set foot outside her den more than three times in the last twelve years, and that’s all there was to it. She may have had her reasons … She was afraid of losing something … She wasn’t going to tell them to people like us, people who were no longer inspired by life.

Her daughter-in-law brought up her commitment project again. “What do you say, doctor?

Don’t you think she’s mad? … We can’t get her to go out anymore! … It would do her good to get out now and then! … Oh yes, grandmother, it would do you good! … Don’t say it wouldn’t! … It would do you good … I assure you!” The old woman shook her head. She shut herself in, stubborn and savage, when that kind of pressure was put on her …

“She won’t let us take care of her … She’d rather relieve herself in the corners … It’s cold in her shack, and there’s no fire … We really can’t let her go on like this … Don’t you agree, doctor, that we can’t … ?”

I pretended not to understand. Henrouille had stayed home beside the stove, he preferred not to know exactly what his wife and mother and I were cooking up … The old woman flew off the handle again.

“Give me back everything that’s mine and I’ll go away … I have money to live on … And that’s the last you’ll ever hear of me! …”

“Money to live on! But grandmother! You can’t expect to live on your three thousand a year! … The cost of living has gone up since the last time you went out! … You tell her, doctor, wouldn’t it be better for her to go and live with the Sisters like we told her … The Sisters are good and kind …”

But the thought of the Sisters gave her the creeps.

“The Sisters! The Sisters!” she rebelled. “I’ve never stayed with any Sisters … Why not send me to live with the priest while you’re at it! … If I haven’t got enough money, as you say, I’ll go to work!”

“Work, grandmother? Where? Oh, doctor, would you listen to her! Work at her age! She’ll soon be eighty! It’s madness, doctor. Who’d want her? Why, you’re insane, grandmother! …”

“Insane! Nobody! Nowhere! … Aren’t you somewhere? … You lump of shit, you!”

“Listen to her, doctor! She’s raving and insulting me! How can you expect us to keep her here?”

The old woman turned to confront me, the new peril.

“How does he know if I’m crazy or not? Is he inside my head? Is he inside yours? He’d have to be to know! … Beat it, both of you! … Get out of my home! … The way you keep at me you’re meaner than six months of winter! … Go and examine my son instead of standing there jabbering in the henbane! He needs a doctor a sight more than I do! Not a tooth left in his head, and they were perfect when I was taking care of him! Go on, beat it, get out, the both of you!” And she slammed the door in our faces. From behind her lamp she watched us retreating across the yard. When we’d reached the other side, when we were far enough away, she started snickering again. She’d given a good account of herself.

When we got back from that disagreeable incursion, Henrouille was still standing by the stove, with his back to us. His wife went on pestering me with questions, all aimed in the same direction … She had a dark, sly little face. Her elbows hugged her body when she spoke. She never gestured. She was determined that this medical consultation shouldn’t be wasted, she wanted it to serve some purpose … The cost of living was going up all the time … Her mother-in-law’s pension wasn’t enough anymore … They were getting old themselves after all … They couldn’t go on forever living in fear that the old woman would die without proper care … that she’d set the house on fire … in her fleas and filth … instead of going to a perfectly good institution, where she’d be taken care of … Since I put on an air of agreeing with them, they were both as affable as could be … they promised to sing my praises in the neighborhood … if only I’d help them … take pity on them … rid them of the old woman … who was miserable herself, living in the conditions she brought on herself with her obstinacy …

“We could even rent her little house,” suggested the husband, who had suddenly woken up … He’d put his foot in it, saying that in front of me. His wife stepped on his foot under the table. He didn’t understand why.

While they were wrangling, I thought about the thousand francs I could pocket just by making out a

certificate of commitment. They seemed to want it badly … Bébert's aunt had probably told them all about me and assured them that I was the down-at-heelest doctor in all Rancy … and would do anything they asked … They'd never have expected Frolichon to do a thing like that! He was virtuous!

I was deep in these reflections when the old woman burst into the room where we were plotting. She must have suspected something. What a spectacle! She had bunched her ragged skirts over her belly, and there she was, all tucked up, screaming at us and at me in particular. She'd come in from the far end of the garden for that express purpose!

"Blackguard!" she yelled at me point blank. "You can go home! Didn't I tell you to beat it!

You won't gain anything by hanging around! … I'm not going to the nuthouse! … Nor to the Sisters either! … Do your damnedest, lie your head off! … You won't get me, you bought and paid-for pimp! … They'll go before I do, the thieves, robbing an old woman! … And you, too, you rotter, you'll end up in jail, I'm telling you, and it won't be long!"

I was certainly out of luck. For once I'd had a chance of making a thousand francs at one stroke! I took to my heels.

When I was out in the street, she leaned over the little peristyle to shout after me in the darkness. "Scoundrel! … Scoundrel!" she shrieked. And the echo came back. The rain was coming down. I ran from lamppost to lamppost as far as the urinal on the Place des Fętes. The first available shelter.

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In that aedicula at hip height, I found Bébert. He too had gone there for shelter. He had seen me running out of the Henrouille house. “So that’s where you’ve been …” he said. “Now you’ll have to go up and see the people on the fifth floor of our house, it’s their daughter …” The girl he was referring to, I knew her well … wide hips, beautiful thighs, long and silky … There was something tender yet willful about her, and in her movements the precise grace that you often find in women who are sexually fit. She had consulted me several times about her pains in the abdomen. At twenty-five, after her third abortion, she was having complications. Her family called it anemia.

You should have seen her, so solidly built and with a taste for coitus unusual in females. Discreet in her ways, modest in dress and speech. Not the least bit hysterical. But well endowed, well fed, well balanced, a champion in her line. An athlete of pleasure. No harm in that. She only went with married men. And only with connoisseurs, men capable of recognizing and appreciating nature’s triumphs, who won’t settle for some vicious little slut. No, her soft skin, her sweet smile, her way of walking, and the nobly mobile fullness of her hips earned her the heartfelt, well-merited enthusiasm of certain office managers who knew their stuff.

Unfortunately these office managers couldn’t divorce their wives on her account. On the contrary, she helped them to stay happily married. So every time she found herself three months gone, it never failed, she went to the midwife. When you’re a hot number and you haven’t got a sucker handy, life is no bed of roses.

Her mother opened the door by a crack, as cautiously as if she’d been expecting a murderer. She spoke in whispers, but they were so loud, so intense, she might just as well have been cursing.

“Oh, doctor, what have I done to deserve such a daughter! Oh, doctor, you won’t breathe a word to anyone in the neighborhood, will you? … I trust you …” She went on and on, airing her fears and spluttering about what the neighbors might think … She was having an attack of knuckleheaded anxiety. Those attacks last a long time.

She gave me time to get used to the dim light in the hallway, the smell of leeks in the soup, the wallpaper with its idiotic leaves and flowers, and her strangled voice. Finally, amid bumblings and exclamations, we reached her daughter’s bedside. She lay prostrate, her mind wandering. I’d have like to examine her, but she was losing so much blood, there was such a gooey mess I couldn’t see anything in her vagina. Blood clots. A glug-glug between her legs like in the decapitated colonel’s neck in the war. All I could do was put back the big wad of cotton and pull up the blanket.

The mother was looking at nothing and listening to nothing but herself. “It’ll kill me, doctor! I’ll die of shame!” I made no attempt to dissuade her. I didn’t know what to do. We could see the father pacing back and forth in the little dining room next door. Apparently he hadn’t finished composing his attitude for the occasion. Maybe he was waiting for things to come to a head before selecting a posture. He was in a kind of limbo. People live from one play to the next. In between, before the curtain goes up, they don’t quite know what the plot will be or what part will be right for them, they stand there at a loss, waiting to see what will happen, their instincts folded up like an umbrella, squirming, incoherent, reduced to themselves, that is, to nothing. Cows without a train.

But the mother had the leading part as intermediary between her daughter and me. The stage could cave in, she didn’t give a damn, she was happy and convinced of her goodness and beauty.

I couldn’t count on anyone but myself to break this sickening spell. I risked suggesting that the girl should be sent straight to the hospital for an emergency operation.

A big mistake! I’d given her the cue for her finest speech, the one she’d been waiting for.

“Oh God, the disgrace! The hospital! Oh, doctor! The disgrace of it! All we needed! The last straw!”

There was nothing I could say. I sat down and listened to the mother thrashing about more tumultuously than ever, entangled in her tragic absurdities. Too much humiliation, too much misery culminate in total inertia. The world is too much for you to bear. You give up. While she invoked and provoked Heaven and Hell, thundering disaster, I looked down in defeat and, looking, saw a small puddle of blood forming under the girl’s bed, from which a thin trickle oozed slowly along the wall toward the door. A drop fell regularly from the bed springs. Drip drip. The towels between her legs were soaked red. I managed to ask, very timidly, whether the whole placenta had been ejected. The girl’s hands, pale and bluish at the tips, hung down on either side of the bed. It was the mother again who answered my question with a flood of disgusting

jeremiads. I should have reacted, but I hadn't the strength.

I myself had been so obsessed by my bad luck for so long, I was sleeping so badly that I was just drifting, I didn't care whether one thing happened rather than another. My only thought was that if I had to listen to this screeching mother I was better off sitting than standing. It doesn't take much to please you once you're thoroughly resigned. And anyway, where would I have found the fortitude to interrupt this wild woman who "didn't know how she was going to save the family's honor." What a part! And how she ranted! After every abortion, I knew from experience, she let loose in the same way, trying, it goes without saying, to outdo herself each time! How long it went on she alone could decide!

Today she seemed determined to decuple the effect!

She, it occurred to me, must have been beautiful herself, as luscious as you please in her day; but more verbose, I'm pretty sure, more wasteful of energy, more demonstrative than her daughter, whose concentrated intimacy had been one of nature's truly admirable achievements. Those things haven't been studied as closely as they deserve. The mother sensed her daughter's animal superiority and instinctively condemned it out of hand, the unforgettable depth of her fucking, her way of coming like a continent!

In any case she was delighted with the theatrical aspect of the disaster. Her mournful tremolos monopolized the attention of our little group, as thanks to her we floundered in chorus. And there was no hope of getting her out of there. I ought to have tried, though. To do something. It was my duty, as they say. But I was too comfortable sitting and too uncomfortable standing.

Their place was a bit more cheerful than the Henrouilles', just as ugly but more comfortable. Cosy. Not sinister like the Henrouilles'. Just plain ugly.

Dazed with fatigue, I glanced around the room. Little things without value that had always been in the family, especially the mantelpiece cover with its little pink velvet bells that you can't buy anymore, and the porcelain Neapolitan, and the sewing table with the beveled mirror, a present no doubt from an aunt in the provinces who had had two of them. I said nothing to the mother about the puddle of blood I saw forming under the bed or the drops that kept falling punctually, she'd have screeched even louder and wouldn't have listened to me anymore. She was never going to stop complaining and venting her indignation. She was dedicated.

Just as well to keep still and look out of the window as the gray velvet of evening took hold of the avenue, house by house, first the smallest, then the others; in the end the big ones are taken, too, and the people moving about in between, more and more faint, vague and blurred, hesitating as they pass from sidewalk to sidewalk before vanishing into the darkness.

Further away, far beyond the fortifications, strings and rows of lights scattered through the night like tacks to hang forgetfulness over the city, and other little lights, red and green, boats and more boats, a whole flotilla come from all directions, tremulously waiting for the great gates of night to open behind the Tower.

If that mother had taken a moment to breathe, or better still, if there had been a long moment of silence, I might have dropped everything and tried to forget that it was necessary to live. But she kept at me.

"Couldn't I give her an enema, doctor? What do you think?" I didn't say yes or no, but once again, since she gave me a chance to speak, I advised immediate removal to the hospital. The only response was more yelping, sharper, more resolute, more strident than ever. There was nothing to be done.

I made slowly and quietly for the door.

The shadows now lay between us and the bed.

I could scarcely see the girl's hands resting on the sheet, because the two pallors were so much alike.

I went back and felt her pulse, which was weaker, more furtive than before. Her breath came in gasps. I could still hear her blood dripping on the floor like a watch ticking more and more slowly, more and more faintly. I couldn't do a thing. The mother went ahead of me to the door.

Especially, doctor," she said in a paroxysm of terror, "promise you won't say a word to anyone!" She implored me. "Give me your word!"

I promised anything she wanted. I held out my hand. She gave me twenty francs. She closed the door behind me, little by little.

Downstairs Bébert's aunt was waiting for me with her most solemn expression. "Is it bad?" she inquired. I realized that she'd been waiting for half an hour to collect her usual commission of two francs. To make sure I wouldn't get away. "And how about the Henrouilles? Everything all right?" she asked. She was hoping to collect a tip for them too.

"They didn't pay me," I replied. Which was true. Her prepared smile turned to a pout. She suspected me.

"It's really too bad, doctor, if you can't get people to pay you. How can you expect people to respect you? … Nowadays people pay right away or not at all!" That, too, was true. I beat it. I had put my beans on to cook before leaving. Now was the time, at nightfall, to go and buy my milk. During the day people smiled to see me with my bottle. Naturally. No maid.

Winter dragged on, stretching out over months and months. We were always deep in rain and mist, they were at the bottom of everything.

There were plenty of patients, but not many who were willing and able to pay. Medicine is a thankless profession. When you get paid by the rich, you feel like a flunky, by the poor like a thief. How can you take a fee from people who can't afford to eat or go to the movies? Especially when they're at their last gasp. It's not easy. You let it ride. You get soft-hearted. And your ship goes down.

When the quarterly rent came due in January, I first sold my sideboard, I told the neighborhood people I needed the space, because I was planning to give physical culture classes in my dining room. I wonder if anyone believed me. In February, to pay my taxes, I sold my bicycle and the phonograph Molly had given me as a going-away present. It played "No More Worries." The tune is still running through my head. It's all I've got left. As for the records, Bézin had them in his shop for a long time, and then in the end he sold them.

To make myself sound even richer, I told people I was going to buy a car as soon as the warm weather set in and in preparation I wanted to take in a little cash. I suppose I just didn't have the gall to practice medicine seriously. When I was being escorted to the door after giving the family plenty of advice and handing them my prescription, I'd start talking about everything under the sun just to postpone the moment of payment a little longer. I was no good at playing the prostitute. Most of my patients were so wretchedly poor and foul smelling, so disagreeable too, that I always wondered where they would ever find the twenty francs owing to me and whether they mightn't murder me to get them back. And yet I needed those twenty francs badly. Shameful! I still blush to think of it.

"Fees! …" as my colleagues persisted in saying. It didn't stick in their craw. As if the word made it perfectly natural and there were no need to explain … "Shameful!" I couldn't help thinking, you can't get around it. Everything can be explained, I know that. But that doesn't change the fact that the man who takes five francs from the poor and the wicked will be a louse to his dying day. Ever since then, in fact, I've been sure of being as slimy a customer as anyone else. It's not that I've committed orgies and follies with their ten francs. Certainly not. The landlord took most of it, but that's no excuse either. I wish it were, but it isn't. The landlord is shittier than shit, but that's another story.

What with eating my heart out and navigating in the icy showers of the season, I was beginning to look tubercular myself. Naturally. That's what happens when you have to forego practically every pleasure. Now and then I'd buy a few eggs, but my diet consisted mainly of beans and lentils. They take a long time to cook, I'd spend hours in the kitchen watching them boil after my visiting hours, and since I lived on the second floor I had a fine view of the back court. Back courts are the dungeons of row houses. I had plenty of time to look at my court, and especially to hear it.

That's where the shouts and yells of the twenty houses round about crash and rebound, even the cries of the concierges' little birds, rotting away as they pipe for the spring they will never see in their cages beside the privies, which are all clustered together out at the dark end with their ill-fitting, banging doors. A hundred male and female drunks inhabit those bricks and feed the echoes with their boasting quarrels and muddled, eruptive oaths, especially after lunch on Saturday. That's the intense moment in family life. Shouts of defiance as the drink pours down. Papa is brandishing a chair, a sight worth seeing, like an ax, and Mama a log like a saber! Heaven help the weak! It's the kid who suffers. Anyone unable to defend himself or fight back, children, dogs, and cats, is flattened against the wall. After the third glass of wine, the black kind, the worst, it's the dog's turn, Papa stamps on his paw. That'll teach him to be hungry at the same time as people. It's good for a laugh when he crawls under the bed, whimpering for all he's worth. That's the signal. Nothing arouses a drunken woman so much as an animal in pain, and bulls aren't always handy. The argument starts up again, vindictive, compulsive, delirious, the wife takes the lead, hurling shrill calls to battle at the male. Then comes the melee, the smash-up. The uproar descends on the court, the echo swirls through the half-darkness. The children yap with horror. They've found out what Mama and Papa have in them! Their yells

draw down parental thunders.

I spent whole days waiting for what sometimes happens after these family scenes to happen.

It happened on the fourth floor, across from my window, in the house on the other side. I couldn't see a thing, but I heard it clearly.

There's an end to everything. It's not always death, it's often something else and possibly worse, especially when there are children.

That's where those tenants lived, at the level where the shadow begins to pale. If the father and mother were alone on the days when this kind of thing happened, they'd first have a long argument and then there'd be a long silence. The situation was building up. They had a bone to pick with the little girl. They called her. She knew. She started whimpering right away. She knew what she was in for. To judge by her voice, she must have been about ten. It took me quite a few times before I understood what the two of them did to her. First they tied her up; it took a long time, like getting ready for an operation. That gave them a kick. "You little skunk!" cried the father. "The filthy slut!" went the mother. "We'll teach you!" they'd shout together, and bawl her out for all sorts of things that they probably made up. I think they tied her to the bed posts. Meanwhile the child was squeaking like a mouse in a trap. "That won't help you, you little scum. You've got it coming! Oh yes! You've got it coming!" Then came a volley of oaths, you'd have thought she was cursing at a horse. All steamed up. "Stop talking, Mama," said the little girl gently. "Stop talking, Mama! Hit me, but stop talking!" They gave her a terrible thrashing. I listened to the end to make sure I wasn't mistaken, that this was really happening. I couldn't have eaten my beans with that going on. I couldn't close the window either. I was no good for anything. I was helpless. I just stayed there listening, same as everywhere and always. Still, I believed I gained strength listening to such things, the strength to go further, a strange sort of strength, next time I'd be able to go down even deeper and lower, and listen to other plaints that I hadn't heard before or had had difficulty in understanding, because beyond the plaints we hear, there always seem to be others that we haven't yet heard or understood. When they had beaten her so much she couldn't howl anymore, a little sob continued to come out every time she breathed.

And then I heard the man saying:

"All right, old girl! Step lively! In there!" As happy as a lark. He said that to the mother, and then the door into the next room would slam behind them. Once she said to him, I heard her: "Oh, Julien, I love you so much, I could eat your shit, even if you made turds this big …"

That was their way of making love, their concierge told me, they'd do it in the kitchen, leaning against the sink. They couldn't do it any other way.

I learned those things about them little by little in the street. When I met them, the three of them together, there was nothing to attract notice. They'd be out for a walk like a normal family. And now and then I'd see the father outside his shop on the corner of the Boulevard Poincaré, where they sold "shoes for sensitive feet." He was the head salesman. Most of the time our court had only unrelieved horrors to offer. Especially in the summer, it thundered with threats and echoes and blows, with falling objects and people, and unintelligible insults. The sun never reached the bottom. The walls seemed to be painted with dense blue shadows, especially in the corners. The concierges had their own little privies, clustered like so many beehives. At night when they went out to pee they'd bump into the garbage cans, which would boom like thunder.

Washing, strung from window to window, would be trying to dry.

After dinner, when there were no brutalities under way, what you heard was mostly arguments about the races. But those sporting polemics also ended badly as often as not, with assorted swats and wallops, and behind one of the windows, for one reason or another, someone was always knocked cold in the end.

In the summer everything smelled strong. There was no air left in the court, only smells. The prevailing smell by far is cauliflower. A cauliflower can beat ten toilets, even if they're overflowing. It's a known fact. The ones on the third floor were always overflowing. Madame Cézanne, the concierge at No. 8, would come up with her rattan unplugger. I'd watch her working away, and in the end we got to talking. "If I were you," she advised me,

"I'd take care of the pregnant women on the quiet … Some of the women in this neighborhood really live it up … You'd hardly believe it! … They'd like nothing better than to use your services … Take it from me … It's better than treating cheap clerks for varicose veins … Besides, they pay cash."

Madame Cézanne had an enormous aristocratic contempt, I don't know where she got it, for anybody who

worked …

“The tenants here are never satisfied, you’d think they were in jail, they’ve got to make trouble for everybody! … One day their toilets are plugged up … Another day their gas leaks … Or their letters are being opened! … Always making nuisances of themselves … Pests! The other day one of them spat in his rent envelope … Did you ever hear the like?” Sometimes she’d have to give up trying to unplug a toilet, it was too hard. “I don’t know what they put in there, but at least they shouldn’t let it dry! … I know them … They always send for me too late … If you ask me, they do it on purpose! … In the place where I used to work, it was so hard they had to melt the pipe! … I can’t imagine what those people eat … It’s double strength …”

You’d have a hard time talking me out of the idea that Robinson wasn’t mostly to blame for my trouble starting up again. At first I didn’t pay much attention to my spells. I somehow kept dragging myself from one patient to the next, but I’d become even uneasier than before, more and more so, like in New York, and I was beginning to sleep even worse than usual.

In short, meeting Robinson again had given me a shock, and I seemed to be falling sick again.

With the misery painted all over his face, I felt he was bringing back a bad dream that I’d been unable to get rid of all those years. It was driving me nuts.

All of a sudden he turned up. I’d never see the last of him. He must have been looking for me in the neighborhood, I certainly wasn’t looking for him … He was bound to come back again and make me think about his rotten life. Actually everything conspired to make me think of his repulsive substance. Even those people I saw out the window, who didn’t look like anything much, just walking in the street, chewing the fat in doorways, rubbing shoulders, made me think of him. I knew what they were after and what they were hiding behind their innocent look. To kill and get killed, that’s what they wanted, not all at once of course, but little by little like Robinson, with all the old sorrows they could summon up, all the new miseries and still nameless hatreds, except when they do it with out-and-out war, and then it’s quicker.

I didn’t even dare go out, for fear of meeting him.

My patients would have to send for me two or three times in a row before I’d make up my mind to visit them. Usually they had called in someone else by the time I got there. My head was a shambles like life itself. I was called to 12 Rue Saint-Vincent, fourth floor, where I’d been only once before. Actually, they came to get me in a car. I recognized the grandfather right away, he wiped his feet elaborately on my doormat. A furtive type, gray and stooped, his grandson was sick and he wanted me to hurry.

I remembered his daughter too, another strapping wench, a little faded, but strong and silent, she always came home to her parents for her abortions. They never scolded her, but all the same they wished she’d finally get married, all the more so since she already had a little boy of two staying with the grandparents.

For no reason at all this child was always getting sick, and when he was sick, the grandfather, the grandmother, and the mother wept together. What made them weep all the more was that he had no legitimate father. It’s at times like that that families are most afflicted by irregular situations. The grandparents were convinced, without quite admitting it to themselves, that illegitimate children are more delicate and prone to illness than others. The father, at any rate the putative father, had cleared out for good. They had talked marriage to him so much that he couldn’t take it anymore. He’d beat it so fast that if he was still running he must have been far away by then. Nobody could understand why he had run out on her like that, least of all the girl herself, because he had really enjoyed fucking her.

Now that the fickle lover had gone, all three of them contemplated the child and blubbered. She had given herself to that man “body and soul,” as they say. In her opinion that explained everything, it was bound to happen. The baby had come out of her body and left her thighs all wrinkled. The mind is satisfied with phrases, but not the body, the body is more fastidious, it wants muscles. A body always tells the truth, that’s why it’s usually depressing and disgusting to look at. It’s true that I’ve rarely known a single childbirth to demolish so much youth. All that mother had left, in a manner of speaking, was feelings and a soul. No one wanted her anymore.

Before that clandestine birth, the family had lived in the Filles du Calvaire quarter, they had lived there for years. If they exiled themselves to Rancy, it wasn’t for the pleasure of it, it was to hide, to get themselves forgotten, to disappear.

As soon as it became impossible to conceal the pregnancy from the neighbors, they decided to leave their Paris neighborhood to avoid all comments. A removal for honor’s sake. In Rancy they didn’t need the respect of their neighbors. In the first place no one knew them in Rancy, and in the second place the municipal

government was known all over France for its abominable politics; not to mince words, they were anarchists, thugs. In that kind of community public opinion is of no account.

The family had punished themselves voluntarily, cutting themselves off from all their old relations and old friends. Their tragedy was complete. Nothing more to lose, so they said. Declassed. When you're determined to lose your name, you go among the common people. They found no fault with anyone. They merely tried to discover by feeble little acts of rebellion what Destiny could have had in mind the day it had played them such a dirty trick. Living in Rancy gave the daughter only one consolation, but that was a big one. Now she could talk freely to all and sundry about "her new responsibilities." In deserting her, her lover had awakened a passion for heroism and singularity that had lain dormant in her nature. As soon as she felt sure that she would never for the rest of her days lead the same sort of life as most women of her class and background, and that she would always be in a position to invoke the tragedy of a life ruined by her very first love, she adjusted with alacrity to the great disaster that had befallen her and, all things considered, the ravages of fate became tragically welcome. She glorified in her unmarried-mother act. In the dining room, as her father and I went in, the economy lighting stopped at half-tints and faces appeared only as pale spots, blobs of flesh mumbling words that hung suspended in a penumbra heavy with the smell of old pepper that all heirloom furniture exudes. The child, lying swaddled on his back in the middle of the table, let me palpate him. To begin with, I pressed the wall of his abdomen, ever so carefully and slowly, from the navel to the testicles, and then still very gravely I auscultated him.

His heartbeat was like a kitten's, sharp and nervous. Then the child had enough of my exploring fingers and began to yell as children can do at that age, incredibly. That was too much. Since Robinson's return I'd been feeling very funny in body and mind, and the little innocent's screams made an abominable impression on me. What screams! Heavens above, what screams! I was at the end of my rope.

Another idea must have helped to provoke my idiotic behavior. In my exasperation, I couldn't stop myself from blurting out all the rancor and disgust I had been holding in for too long.

"Hey," I said to that little bellower, "don't be in such a hurry, you little fool, you'll have plenty of time for bellowing! Never fear, you little idiot, there'll be time to spare. Save your strength. There'll be enough misery to melt your eyes and your head and everything else if you don't watch out!"

The grandmother gave a start:

"What are you saying, doctor?" I repeated simply:

"There will be plenty!"

"What?" she asked in horror. "Plenty of what?"

"You have to understand!" I said. "You have to understand. You're always having things explained to you! That's the whole trouble! Try to understand! Make an effort!"

"What will be left … What's he saying?" they all three asked one another. The daughter

"with the responsibilities" made a strange face and started emitting prodigiously long screams. Here was a marvelous occasion for a fit, and she wasn't going to miss it. She meant business. She kicked! She choked! She squinted horribly! I'd done it all right! You should have seen her! "Mama, he's mad!" She bellowed so hard she almost choked. "The doctor's gone mad! Mama, take my baby away from him!" She was saving her child. I shall never know why, she began in her agitation to take on a Basque accent. "He's saying such awful things! *Mameng!* … He's insane! …"

They snatched the baby out of my hands as if they were rescuing him from the flames. The grandfather, who had been so deferential only a short while ago, unhooked an enormous mahogany thermometer from the wall, it was as big as a club … And he pursued me at a distance to the door, which he slammed violently behind me with a big kick. Naturally they took advantage of the incident not to pay for my call … When I found myself back on the street, I wasn't exactly pleased with what had happened. Not so much because of my reputation, which couldn't have been worse in the neighborhood than people had already made it with no help from me, as because of Robinson, from whom I had hoped to deliver myself with my outburst of frankness, to find the strength never to see him again by deliberately creating a scandal, by stirring up this hideous scene with myself.

Here's what I figured: by my little experiment I'd see how much of a stink it's possible to kick up at one throw. The trouble with scenes and tantrums is that you're never finished, you never know how far you'll be forced to go in your frankness … What people are still hiding from you … And what they'll show you some day … if

you live long enough … if you go far enough into the heart of their cock-and-bull stories … The whole business would have to be started all over again.

I, too, just then, was in a hurry to hide. I started for home by way of the Impasse Gibet, then I took the Rue Valentines. It was quite a distance. Time to change my mind. I headed for the lights. On the Place Transitoire I met Péridon the lamp lighter. We exchanged a few innocent remarks. “On your way to the movies, doctor?” he asked me. That gave me the idea. A good one, I thought.

The bus gets you there quicker than the Métro. After that shameful incident I’d have been glad to leave Rancy for good if I’d been able to.

When you stay too long in the same place, things and people go to pot on you, they rot and start stinking for your special benefit.

17

In spite of everything it was just as well that I went back to Rancy next day, because of Bébert, who fell sick just then. My colleague Frolichon had just gone off on his vacation. Bébert's aunt hesitated, then she asked me to take care of her nephew after all, probably because I charged less than any other doctor she knew.

It was after Easter. The weather was looking up. The first south winds were passing over Rancy, the ones that blew all the soot from the factories down on our windowpanes. Bébert was sick for weeks and weeks. I went to see him twice a day. The neighborhood people would wait for me outside the lodge, pretending to be just passing by, and on the doorsteps of their houses. It gave them something to do. People would come a long way to find out if he was better or worse. The sunshine has too many things to pass through; it never gives the street anything better than an autumn light full of regrets and clouds. People gave me lots of advice in connection with Bébert. The fact is, the whole neighborhood took an interest in his case. Some thought well, others poorly, of my intelligence. When I went into the lodge, a critical, rather hostile, and most of all crushingly stupid silence set in. The lodge was always full of the aunt's cronies, it smelled strongly of petticoats and rabbit piss. Each had her own favorite doctor, who was cleverer and more learned than any other. I presented only one advantage, but one that's hard to forgive, I charged hardly anything. A free-gratis doctor is bad for the reputation of a patient and his family, however poor they may be.

Bébert wasn't delirious yet, he had just lost all desire to move. He was losing weight by the day. A bit of yellow, flabby flesh still clung to his bones and quivered from top to bottom every time his heart beat. He'd got so thin in over a month of illness that his heart seemed to be all over his body. He'd look at me with a lucid smile when I came to see him. Sweetly he ran a temperature of 102, then of 103, and there he lay with a pensive look on his face for days and weeks.

After a while Bébert's aunt had shut up and stopped bothering us. She had said everything she knew. That took the wind out of her sails, so she'd go and blubber in one corner of her lodge after another. Grief had come to her when she ran out of words, and she didn't seem to know what to do with it. She'd try to wipe it off with her handkerchief, but it came back in her throat all mixed with tears, and she'd start all over again. She'd get it all over her and manage to be a little dirtier than usual. That would upset her and she'd cry out: "Oh dear!

Oh dear!" That was all. She had cried so much she was exhausted, her arms would fall to her sides, and she'd stand there in front of me, absolutely bewildered. But then after all she'd go back into her grief and give herself a jolt and start sobbing again. These comings and goings in her misery went on for weeks. I couldn't dispel the feeling that this illness would end badly. It was a kind of malignant typhoid that baffled all my efforts, baths, serum, dry diet, vaccines … Nothing helped. I did everything I could think of … all in vain. Bébert was going, being carried away irresistibly, smiling all the while. He was high up, balanced on top of his fever, and I was down below making a fool of myself. Naturally a lot of people were advising the aunt, pressing her to fire me in no uncertain terms and call in another, more imposing and more experienced doctor in a hurry. The incident of the girl "with the responsibilities" had gone the rounds and been liberally commented on. The whole neighborhood was gargling with it.

But since the other doctors, once informed of the nature of Bébert's illness, showed no eagerness to take the case, I was kept on in the end. As long as Bébert had fallen to my lot, my colleagues figured, I might as well see him through.

All I could do was go to the bistrot now and then and phone various doctors in the Paris hospitals, with whom I was more or less acquainted, and ask those sage, widely respected luminaries what they would do if faced with a case of typhoid like the one that was driving me mad. They all gave me excellent, ineffectual advice, but all the same it pleased me to hear them making an effort free of charge for the benefit of the unknown child I had taken under my wing. After a while you start taking pleasure in the merest trifles, the small consolations life deigns to give us.

While I was busying myself with such subtleties, Bébert's aunt was collapsing on every chair and staircase in the house; she'd emerge from her daze only to eat. But she never missed a meal. Her neighbors wouldn't have let her forget. They watched over her. They stuffed her between sobs. "It'll keep your strength up!" they declared. She even began to put on weight.

Speaking of Brussels sprouts, the smell rose to orgiastic heights at the peak of Bébert's illness. It was the season. Everyone was making her presents of Brussels sprouts, ready cooked and steaming hot. "It's true," she was glad to admit, "they give me strength. And besides, they make me urinate."

Before bedtime, because of the doorbell, so as to sleep lightly and hear the very first ring, she'd fill herself full of coffee. That way the tenants wouldn't wake Bébert by ringing two or three times. Passing by the house in the evening, I'd go in to see if maybe it was all over. She'd speculate out loud: "Don't you think it may have been the rum and camomile tea he drank at the fruit store the day of the bicycle race that made him sick?" That idea had been plaguing her from the start. The stupid fool.

"Camomile!" Bébert murmured faintly, an echo submerged in his fever. Why try to tell her different? I'd go through the two or three professional motions she expected of me, and then I'd go and face the night, not at all pleased with myself, because, like my mother, I could never feel entirely innocent of any horrible thing that happened. About the seventeenth day I decided that it might not be a bad idea to drop in at the Joseph Bioduret Institute and ask them what they thought about a typhoid case of this kind. Maybe they'd give me a bit of advice or recommend some vaccine. That way, if Bébert were to die, I'd have done everything possible, tried everything, however out of the way, and then perhaps I wouldn't feel eternally guilty. At about eleven o'clock one morning I arrived at the Institute near La Villette at the other end of Paris. First they sent me wandering through laboratories and more laboratories, looking for a man of science. There wasn't a soul in those laboratories at that hour, neither laymen nor men of science, only various objects in wild disorder, the gutted bodies of small animals, cigarette butts, chipped gas jets, cases and jars with mice suffocating inside them, retorts, bladders, broken stools, books, dust, and more cigarette butts, which, mingled with the effluvia of the urinals, made up the prevailing smell. Since I was early, I thought while I was at it, I'd go and visit the tomb of that great scientist, Joseph Bioduret, which was right there in the basement of the Institute, in with the gold and marble. A bourgeoiso-Byzantine fantasy in the best of taste!

The collection was taken on your way out of the crypt, and the guard was grumbling because someone had slipped him a Belgian coin. In the last half-century the shining example of this Bioduret had led any number of young people to choose the scientific career. And the scientific career had produced as many failures as the Conservatory. After a certain number of years of failure, scientists turn out to be pretty much alike. In the mass graves of the great débâcle a Doctor of Medicine is as good as a "Prix de Rome." The only difference is that they don't take the bus at exactly the same time of day. That's all. I had to wait quite a long while in the garden of the Institute, a combination of prison yard and city square, with flowers carefully lined up along malignantly decorated walls. At last some underlings began to turn up. Several, dragging their feet listlessly, were carrying provisions from the nearby market in large shopping bags. Then, in small, unshaven, whispering groups, the men of science came sauntering through the gate, more slowly and diffidently than their humble assistants, and dispersed down different corridors, scraping the paint off the walls as they passed. Gray-haired, umbrella-carrying schoolboys, stupefied by the pedantic routine and intensely revolting experiments, riveted by starvation wages for their whole adult lives to these little microbe kitchens, there to spend interminable days warming up mixtures of vegetable scrapings, asphyxiated guinea pigs, and other nondescript garbage.

They themselves, when all's said and done, were nothing but monstrous old rodents in overcoats. Glory, in our time, smiles only on the rich, men of science or not. All those plebeians of Research had to keep them going was their fear of losing their niches in this heated, illustrious, and compartmented garbage pail. What meant most to them was the title of official scientist, thanks to which the pharmacists of the city still trusted them more or less to analyse, for the most niggardly pay incidentally, their customers' urine and sputum. The slimy wages of science.

Arriving in his compartment, the methodic researcher would spend a few moments gazing ritually at the bilious, decaying viscera of last week's rabbit, which was on classic and permanent display in one corner of the room, a putrid font. When the smell became really intolerable, another rabbit would be sacrificed, but not before, because of the fanatic thrift of Professor Jaunisset, who was then Secretary General of the Institute. Thanks to this thrift, some of the rotting animals gave rise to unbelievable by-products and derivatives. It's all a matter of habit. Some of the more practiced laboratory technicians had become so accustomed to the smell of putrefaction that they would have had no objection to cooking in an operational coffin. These modest auxiliaries of exalted scientific research sometimes outdid the thrift of Professor Jaunisset himself, taking advantage of the Bunsen burners to cook themselves countless ragouts and other, still riskier concoctions. After absently examining the viscera of the ritual guinea pig and rabbit, the men of science slowly proceeded to the second act of their scientific daily life, the smoking of cigarettes. Thus they strove to neutralize the ambient stench and their boredom with tobacco smoke, and managed, from butt to butt, to get through the day. At five o'clock they put the various putrefactions back in the ramshackle incubator cabinet to keep them warm. Octave, the technician, hid the string beans he had cooked behind a newspaper to get them safely past the concierge. Subterfuges. Taking them home to Gargan all ready for supper. The man of science, his master, was still writing a little something, diffidently, doubtingly in one corner of his laboratory book, with a view to a forthcoming and utterly pointless paper that he would feel obliged to present before long to some infinitely impartial and disinterested Academy and that would serve to justify his presence at the Institute and the

meager advantages it conferred.

A true man of science takes at least twenty years on an average to make the great discovery, that is, to convince himself that one man's lunacy is not necessarily another man's delight, and that all of us here below are bored with the bees in our neighbors' bonnets. The coldest, most rational scientific madness is also the most intolerable. But when a man has acquired a certain ability to subsist, even rather scantily, in a certain niche with the help of a few grimaces, he must either keep at it or resign himself to dying the death of a guinea pig. Habits are acquired more quickly than courage, especially the habit of filling one's stomach.

I ransacked the Institute for Parapjne, I'd come all the way from Rancy to see him, so naturally I kept on looking. It was no small order. I made several false starts, hesitating a long while before choosing among so many corridors and doors.

Parapine was an old bachelor, he never ate lunch and I doubt if he ate dinner more than two or three times a week, but then enormously, with the frenzy of the Russian student, all of whose outlandish ways he had retained.

Parapine was an undisputed eminence in his special field. He knew all there was to know about typhoid in animals as well as human beings. His reputation went back twenty years to the day when certain German authors claimed to have isolated the Eberthella in the vaginal excreta of an eighteen-month-old girl, so creating an enormous stir in the Halls of Truth. Only too delighted to take up the challenge in the name of the National Institute, Parapine had outdone those Teutonic braggarts by breeding the same microbes, now in its pure form, in the sperm of a seventy-two-year-old invalid. Instantly famous, he managed to hold the limelight for the rest of his life by publishing a few unreadable columns in various medical journals. This he had done without difficulty ever since his day of audacity and good fortune.

The serious scientific public trusted him implicitly and consequently had no need to read him. If those people were to start getting critical, no further progress would be possible. They would spend a whole year over every page.

When I came to the door of his cell, Serge Parapine was spitting steady streams into all four corners of his laboratory, with a grimace of such disgust that it made you wonder. Parapine shaved now and then, but he always had enough hair on his cheeks to make him look like an escaped convict. He was always shivering or at least he seemed to be, though he never removed his overcoat, which presented a large assortment of spots and still more of dandruff, which he would scatter far and wide with little flicks of his fingernails, at the same time bringing his always oscillating forelock back into position over his red-andgreen nose. In the course of my laboratory work in medical school, Parapine had given me some instruction in the use of the microscope and had shown me unquestionable kindness on several occasions. I hoped he had not forgotten me completely since those remote days and that he might consent to give me valuable advice in connection with Bébert, with whose case I was really obsessed.

Undoubtedly, I was much more interested in preventing Bébert from dying than if he had been an adult. You never mind very much when an adult passes on. If nothing else, you say to yourself, it's one less stinker on earth, but with a child you can never be so sure. There's always the future.

Once acquainted with my difficulties, Parapine asked nothing better than to help me and to orient my perilous therapy, but unfortunately, in twenty years, he had learned so many, so diverse, and so often contradictory things about typhoid that by that time he was just about unable to formulate any clear and definite opinion concerning that most commonplace ailment and its treatment.

"First of all, my dear colleague," he said. "Do you believe in serums? Huh? Give me your honest opinion … And vaccines? … What do you really think? … Some of the best minds today have no use for vaccines at all … That of course is a bold way of thinking … Yes, indeed … but even so … in the last analysis … Don't you think there's a certain truth in that sort of negativism? …"

The sentences issued from his mouth in terrifying bursts, amid avalanches of tremendous R's.

While he was struggling like a lion against other enraged and desperate hypotheses, Jaunisset, the illustrious Secretary General of the Institute, who was still alive at the time, passed our windows frowning superciliously.

At the sight of him, Parapine turned if possible paler than ever and abruptly changed the subject in his haste to show me all the disgust aroused in him by the mere daily sight of this Jaunisset, who was glorified by just about everyone else. In half a second he disposed of Jaunisset as a crook and maniac of the first water, accusing him of enough monstrous, unprecedented, and secret crimes to fill a penal colony for a century. I was powerless to stop Parapine from giving me hundreds of hate-ridden pointers about the clownish trade of

medical research, which he was obliged to practice if he wanted to eat. This hatred of his was more precise, more scientific you might say, than the hatreds emanating from other men occupying similar positions in offices or shops. He spoke in a very loud voice, and I was amazed at his outspokenness. His technician was listening to us. He, too, had finished his bit of cookery and was still moving about, for form's sake, between incubator and test tubes, but he had grown so accustomed to listening to Parapine pouring out his more or less daily maledictions that he had come to regard these tirades, however extravagant, as absolutely academic and meaningless. Certain little private experiments that this technician pursued with great seriousness in one of the laboratory's incubators struck him, on the other hand, as prodigiously and deliciously instructive compared to Parapine's outpourings. Parapine's rages in no way tempered his enthusiasm. Before leaving, he tenderly, scrupulously shut the door of the incubator on his private microbes, as if it were a tabernacle.

"Did you notice that technician of mine, my dear colleague?" said Parapine as soon as he had gone. "Did you notice that old fool? He's been cleaning up my rubbish for almost thirty years, and all he ever hears people talk about is science, but that most abundantly and sincerely … well, far from being disgusted, he, unlike everyone else in the whole place, has come to believe in it! After handling my cultures for years, he thinks they're marvelous!

He dotes on them … The most meaningless of my buffooneries enchants him! Isn't it the same with all religions? Hasn't the priest stopped believing in God years ago, while his sacristan goes on believing … Heart and soul! … It's sickening! … That old fool carries absurdity to the point of aping the dress and goatee of the illustrious Joseph Bioduret! Did you notice? … Between you and me, the great Bioduret wasn't so very different from my technician except for his worldwide reputation and the intensity of his manias … That giant of experimental science with his mania for rinsing his bottles with care and observing the hatching out of moths in incredible detail, has always struck me as monstrously vulgar … Take away his prodigious pettiness, his housekeeping and, I ask you, what's left to admire about the great Bioduret? All right, I'll tell you: The hateful look of a malignant, cantankerous concierge. That's all. In his twenty years of membership in the Academy he had ample time to exhibit his vile, contemptible character … nearly everyone hated him, he quarreled … and what quarrels! … with just about everyone in sight. The man was an ingenious megalomaniac, nothing more …"

Parapine was slowly getting ready to leave. I helped him put a scarf around his neck and a sort of mantilla over his eternal dandruff. Then he remembered that I'd come to see him about something precise and urgent. "My word!" he said. "Here I've been boring you with my own little problems and forgetting your patient. Forgive me, colleague, and let's get back to our subject. But after all, what can I tell you that you don't already know? Among so many shaky theories and questionable experiments, reason, in the last analysis, forbids us to choose. Just do your best, colleague! Since you have to do something, do your best!

Personally, I must tell you in confidence that typhoidal infections have come to disgust me beyond all measure! Beyond all imagination! When I came to typhoid as a young man, there were only a few of us prospecting the field, we were able to help one another … to advance one another's reputations … While now, what can can I say? They pour in from Lapland, my friend! from Peru! More and more every day! Specialists are turning up from all over the world! In Japan they roll off the assembly line! In less than a few years I've seen the world become a hotbed of universal and preposterous publications on this same hackneyed subject. To maintain and more or less defend my position I've resigned myself to writing and rewriting my same little article from congress to congress, from journal to journal, throwing in a few subtle, innocuous, and quite tangential modifications toward the end of each season … Believe me, colleague, typhoid in our time is as botched and bungled as the mandolin or banjo. It's maddening. Everyone wants to play some little tune in his own way. I may as well admit it, I haven't the strength to drive myself anymore, what I'm looking for, to see me through to the end of my days, is some quiet little backwater of research that will bring me neither enemies nor disciples, but only the mediocre celebrity without jealousy, which I sorely need and with which I shall gladly content myself. Among other absurdities, I have considered studying the comparative influence of central heating on hemorrhoids in northern and southern countries. What do you think of it? The role of hygiene? Of diet? That kind of thing is fashionable nowadays. Such a study, properly handled and ingeniously dragged out, is sure to be favorably received by the Academy, since the majority of its members are old men to whom these problems of heating and hemorrhoids can hardly be indifferent. Look what they've done for cancer, which concerns them so closely … Don't you think the Academy might vote me one of its hygiene awards?

Why not? Ten thousand francs? Not bad … Enough for a trip to Venice … Yes, my young friend, I was in Venice once as a young man … Oh yes! You can starve there just as well as anywhere else … But you breathe a sumptuous aroma of death that's not easy to forget …"

By then we were out on the street, but had to hurry back for his galoshes, which he'd forgotten. That delayed us. Then we rushed through the streets, but he didn't tell me where we were going.

Making our way down the long Rue de Vaugirard strewn with vegetables and other encumbrances, we approached a square surrounded by chestnut trees and policemen, and we slipped into the back room of a small cafe, where Parapine sat down at a curtained window.

“Too late!” he moaned. “They’ve gone.”

“Who?”

“The little girls from the Lycée … Some of them are charming … I know their legs by heart. I ask for nothing more at the end of my day … Let’s get out of here! I’ll see them another day …”

I’d have been glad if I’d never have had to go back to Rancy. Since the morning when I’d left it, I had almost forgotten my daily cares; they were so deeply incrusted in Rancy that they didn’t follow me. Perhaps they’d have died of neglect like Bébert if I hadn’t gone back. They were suburban cares. Even so, on the Rue Bonaparte, reflection came back to me, the gloomy kind, though it’s a street that would normally be pleasing to a passer-by. Few streets are so smiling and so gracious. But on approaching the Seine, I began to worry. I strolled aimlessly about. I couldn’t make up my mind to cross the river. Everybody can’t be Caesar! Across the bridge, on the opposite bank, my troubles would begin. I reserved the right to wait on the left bank until nightfall. At least, I said to myself, I’d be saving a few hours of sunlight.

The water lapped against the bank where the fishermen were, and I sat down to watch them. I really was in no hurry at all, no more than they were. I’d pretty well come to the point, the age, you might say, when a man knows what he’s losing with every hour that passes. But he hasn’t yet built up the wisdom to pull up sharp on the road of time, and anyway, even if you did stop you wouldn’t know what to do without the frenzy for going forward that has possessed you and won your admiration ever since you were young. Even now you’re not as pleased with your youth as you used to be, but you don’t yet dare admit in public that youth may be nothing more than a hurry to grow old.

In the whole of your absurd past you discover so much that’s absurd, so much deceit and credulity, that it might be a good idea to stop being young this minute, to wait for youth to break away from you and pass you by, to watch it going away, receding in the distance, to see all its vanity, run your hand through the empty space it has left behind, take a last look at it, and then start moving, make sure your youth has really gone, and then calmly, all by yourself, cross to the other side of Time to see what people and things really look like. The fishermen on the bank weren’t catching anything. They didn’t even seem to care very much whether they caught any fish or not. The fish must have known them. They were all just pretending. A fine last glow of sunshine maintained a little warmth around us and sent reflections sprinkled with blue and gold leaping over the water. A cool wind came over to us through the big trees on the far side, a smiling wind blowing through thousands of leaves in gentle gusts. A nice place to be. For two whole hours we stayed there, catching nothing, doing nothing. Then the Seine darkened and the corner of the bridge turned red with the sunset. The people on the qua! above had forgotten us as we sat there between the embankment and the water.

The night came out from under the arches and climbed along the château, taking the façade and, one by one, the sunset-flaming windows.

Again there was nothing I could do but go away.

The booksellers on the quai were shutting up their boxes. “Are you coming?” a woman shouted over the parapet to her fisherman husband beside me, who was putting away his tackle, camp chair, and worms. He grumbled and the other fishermen grumbled after him, and up we went, all of us grumbling, to the quai. I spoke to his wife, just to be saying something pleasant before night took everything away. Then and there she wanted to sell me a book. She had forgotten, so she said, to put it away in her box. “I’ll let you have it at half price, for next to nothing.” A little old Montaigne, absolutely authentic, for one franc. For that little money I was glad to give her pleasure. I took her Montaigne. Under the bridge the water looked dark and heavy. I had lost all desire to go anywhere. On the boulevards I drank a cafe crème and opened the book she had sold me. I just chanced to open it at a letter Montaigne once wrote to his wife after a son of theirs had died. That passage caught my interest at once, probably because it made me think of Bébert. Roughly, this is what Montaigne says to his wife: “Ah, my dear wife, don’t eat your heart out! Cheer up! … Everything will turn out all right! … It always does … And by the way, rummaging through some old papers belonging to a friend of mine, I’ve just found a letter that Plutarch wrote to his wife under circumstances very similar to ours … That letter, dear wife, struck me as so apt, so much to the point, that I’m sending it on to you! … A splendid letter! Well, I won’t keep you waiting any longer, just let me know if it doesn’t do a good job of healing your sorrow! … Dear wife! I’m sending you Plutarch’s fine letter!

It’s really something! I’m sure you’ll like it! … Pay close attention, dear wife! Read it carefully! Show it to

your friends! And read it over! Now my mind is at rest … I'm sure it will set you up! Your devoted husband, Michel." Now that, I said to myself, is a good job. How happy his wife must have been to have a husband like her Michel, who never let anything get him down. Well, it's their business. Maybe we go wrong when we try to judge other people's hearts. Maybe they felt real grief. Period grief?

But as far as Bébert was concerned, my day hadn't been so good. I had no luck with Bébert, dead or alive. It seemed to me that there was nothing for him on earth, not even in Montaigne. Maybe, come to think of it, it's the same for everybody, nothingness. No getting around it, I'd left Rancy that morning, and now I had to go back, empty-handed. I had absolutely nothing to offer him, or his aunt either.

A short stroll around the Place Blanche before going back.

I see people all up and down the Rue Lepic, even more than usual. So I go up too, to see what's going on. The crowd was outside a butcher shop. You had to squeeze into the circle to see what was going on. It was a pig, an enormous pig. He was groaning in the middle of the circle, like a man who's being pestered, but louder. The people were tormenting him, they never stopped. They'd twist his ears just to hear him squeal. He'd tug at his rope and try to escape and squirm and wriggle his feet in the air. Other people would poke him and prod him, and he'd bellow even louder with the pain. Everybody was laughing more and more.

The pig couldn't manage to hide in the little straw he had, it would fly away when he grunted and puffed into it. He couldn't escape from those people, and he knew it. He kept urinating the whole time, but that didn't help him either. Any more than his grunting and bellowing. No hope, Everybody was laughing. The butcher back in his shop was exchanging signs and jokes with his customers and gesticulating with a big knife. He was happy too. He had bought the pig and tied it up as an advertisement. He couldn't have had a better time at his daughter's wedding.

More people kept arriving outside the shop to watch the pig crumpling in big pink folds after every attempt to escape. But that wasn't enough yet. They put a vicious little dog on the pig's back and incited it to jump and snap at the fat dilated flesh. They were having such a wonderful time that they blocked off the street completely. The police had to come and disperse the crowd.

When you get to the top of the Caulaincourt Bridge at about that hour, you see the first lights of Rancy beyond the great lake of night that covers the cemetery. To get there you have to go all the way around. It's a long way. You need so much time and so many steps to get around the cemetery to the fortifications, you get the feeling you're going around the night itself.

When you get to the Porte and the toll station, you pass the stinking old office where the little green official is rotting away. The dogs of the Zone are at their barking posts. In spite of everything you see some flowers in the light of a gas lamp, they belong to the flower woman who is always there, waiting for the dead who pass from day to day, from hour to hour. The cemetery, another cemetery next to it, and then the Boulevard de la Revoke with all its street lamps, heading straight into the night. You just turn left and follow it. That was my street. There was really no fear of meeting anyone. Even so, I'd have liked to be somewhere else and far away. I'd also have liked to be wearing slippers so no one would hear me going in. Yet I was in no way to blame if Bébert wasn't getting better. I had done all I could. I had nothing to reproach myself with. It wasn't my fault if such cases are hopeless. I passed his door?without being noticed, I thought. Upstairs I didn't open the blinds, I looked through the slits to see if there were still people talking outside Bébert's. Some visitors were still coming out of the house, but they didn't look the same as yesterday's visitors. A neighborhood cleaning woman I knew was crying as she left. "It looks bad." I said to myself. "He's certainly no better … Maybe he's dead … if one of them is in tears already." The day was over.

I racked my brains: was I really not at all to blame? It was cold and still in my place. Like a little night just for me, in a corner of the big one.

Now and then the sound of steps rose up to me and the echo came in louder and louder, droning, then dying away … Silence. I looked out again to see if anything was happening across the way. Nothing was happening except inside me, still asking myself the same questions.

I was so tired from walking and finding nothing that I finally fell asleep in my coffin, my private night.

18

Why kid ourselves, people have nothing to say to one another, they all talk about their own troubles and nothing else. Each man for himself, the earth for us all. They try to unload their unhappiness on someone else when making love, they do their damnedest, but it doesn't work, they keep it all, and then they start all over again, trying to find a place for it.

"You're pretty, Mademoiselle," they say. And life takes hold of them again until the next time, and then they try the same little gimmick. "You're very pretty, Mademoiselle …" And in between they boast that they've succeeded in getting rid of their unhappiness, but everyone knows it's not true and they've simply kept it all to themselves. Since at that little game you get uglier and more repulsive as you grow older, you can't hope to hide your unhappiness, your bankruptcy, any longer. In the end your features are marked with that hideous grimace that takes twenty, thirty years or more to climb from your belly to your face. That's all a man is good for, that and no more, a grimace that he takes a whole lifetime to compose. The grimace a man would need to express his true soul without losing any of it is so heavy and complicated that he doesn't always succeed in completing it. Just then I was busy improving my soul with bills I couldn't pay, insignificant as they were, my impossible rent, my overcoat that was much too light for the season, and the grocer who laughed up his sleeve every time he saw me counting my pennies, hesitating to buy a piece of Brie and blushing when the price of grapes started going up. And then my patients, who were never satisfied. Bébert's death hadn't done me any good in the neighborhood. His aunt didn't hold it against me, though. No, I can't say she behaved badly under the circumstances. It was more from the Henrouilles in their private house that trouble and worry suddenly began raining down on me.

One day Grandma Henrouille walked out of her shack without so much as a by-your-leave, ignoring her son and daughter-in-law, and decided entirely on her own to come and see me. She had a head on her shoulders. After that she came many times and asked me if I really thought she was insane. Questioning me like that gave the old woman something to do. She'd wait in my so-called waiting room. Three chairs and a little three-legged table. When I got back that evening, I found her in the waiting room, comforting Bébert's aunt by telling her all about the relatives she herself had lost along the way before arriving at her age, nieces by the dozen, an uncle here and there, a father way back in the middle of the last century, any number of aunts, and her daughters, who had passed on here and there, she couldn't quite remember where or how. Her own daughters had become so vague in her mind that she had to imagine them more or less, but still with deep sorrow when she spoke of them to someone else. By that time her own children were even less than memories. Around her aged loins she gathered a whole nation of humble ancient deaths, shades long silent, imperceptible sorrows, which, when I arrived, she was trying with considerable difficulty to rouse to a little life for the consolation of Bébert's aunt. And then Robinson dropped in to see me. Introductions all around. Friends. In fact it was then, as I later recollected, that Robinson got into the habit of meeting Grandma Henrouille in my waiting room. They'd sit and talk. Bébert was to be buried the next day. "Are you coming?" the aunt asked everyone she met. "I'd appreciate it if you came."

"Of course I'll come," said the old woman. "It's nice to have people around one at such times." There was no keeping her in her hovel. She'd turned into a gadabout.

"Oh, I'm so glad you're coming," the aunt thanked her. "And you, Monsieur, will you come too?" she asked Robinson.

"Oh, I'm afraid of funerals, Madame, you mustn't take it amiss," he said to get out of it. And then each of them talked a lot, all about his own affairs, almost violently, even Grandma Henrouille joined in. They all talked much too loudly, like in a nuthouse. So I went in and took the old woman to my consulting room next door. I didn't have much to say to her. But she had questions for me. I promised not to go through with the commitment proceedings. We went back to the waiting room and sat down with Robinson and the aunt. We all talked for a good hour about the sad case of Bébert. Everyone in the neighborhood agreed that I had knocked myself out trying to save him, that you can't fight fate, and that all in all, to everybody's surprise, I had behaved pretty well. When Grandma Henrouille heard the child's age, seven, she seemed to feel better, that relieved her in a way. The death of so young a child was just an accident in her opinion, not the same as a normal death, which might have given her food for thought. Robinson started in again telling us about the acids that burned his stomach and lungs, suffocated him, and made him spit black phlegm. But Grandma Henrouille didn't spit anything at all, and she didn't work with acids, so what Robinson had to say on the subject was of no interest to her. She had only come to size me up. She looked at me out of the corner of her lively bluish eyes as I spoke, and none of the latent tension between us escaped Robinson. It was dark in my waiting room, the big building on the other side of the street was paling before giving in to the night. After that there were only our voices between us, and all that voices seem on the point of saying but never say.

Once alone with Robinson, I tried to make it plain that I had no desire whatever to see him anymore, but that didn't stop him from coming back toward the end of the month, and almost every evening after that. It's true that his lungs were in bad shape.

"Monsieur Robinson has been asking for you again," said my concierge, who liked him.

"He doesn't seem to be getting better, does he?" she added. "He was coughing again when he came." She knew it annoyed me to hear her talk about him.

It's true that he coughed. "It's hopeless," he himself said. "I'll never get over it …"

"Wait till summer! A little patience! You'll see … It'll just stop …" You know … the kind of thing you say in such cases. I couldn't cure him as long as he was working with acids … But I tried to cheer him up all the same.

"It'll just stop?" he'd say. "You give me a pain. Do you think it's funny breathing like I do … I'd like to see you with a thing like this in your chest … This kind of thing in the chest get a man down … Take it from me …"

"You're depressed, you're having a bad time, but when you feel better … Even a little better, you'll see …"

"A little better? I'll feel a little better when I'm eight feet under! I should have got killed in the war, then I'd feel really better! For you there was some sense in coming back! You can't complain!"

People cling to their rotten memories, to all their misfortunes, and you can't pry them loose. These things keep them busy. They avenge themselves for the injustice of the present by smearing the future inside them with shit. They're cowards deep down, and just. That's their nature.

I stopped answering him. That made him angry.

"You see? You think the same as I do."

To get him to leave me in peace, I made him up some cough syrup. It seems his neighbors complained that he coughed all the time and it kept them awake. While I was filling the bottle, he went on wondering out loud where he could have caught this stubborn cough. He also wanted me to give him injections of gold salts!

"If the injections killed me, I wouldn't mind, you know …" Naturally I wouldn't have anything to do with this heroic therapy. Mostly I wanted him to go away.

Just seeing him hanging around, I'd lost all my pleasure in life. It was already hard enough for me to keep from drifting with the current of my own failure, from giving in to my impulse to close up shop once and for all. Twenty times a day I'd say to myself: "What for?" So listening to his lamentations in addition was really too much.

"You haven't any spirit, Robinson," I finally told him … "You ought to get married, maybe that would give you some zest for life …" If he'd got himself a wife, it would have taken him off my hands. The suggestion made him angry, and he left me. He didn't care for my advice, especially that kind. On the marriage issue he didn't even answer me. And I must admit, that was a pretty silly piece of advice.

One Sunday when I wasn't on duty we went out together. We settled on the terrace of a cafe at the corner of the Boulevard Magnanime and ordered a small *cassis* and a *diabolo*.

We didn't talk much, we didn't have much to say to each other. What good are words anyway when you know the score? You'll only come to blows. There aren't many buses on Sunday. Sitting on the terrace, it's almost a pleasure to see the boulevard so neat and clean, all rested like the people. The phonograph was playing in the café behind us.

"Hear that?" says Robinson. "His phonograph is playing American tunes. I recognize them. It's the ones they played at Molly's place in Detroit …"

In the two years he'd spent there he hadn't gone very far into American life. Still, he'd been touched in a way by their brand of music, where they, too, try to get away from the weight of routine and the crushing misery of having to do the same thing every day … While it's playing, they can shuffle about for a while with a life that has no meaning. Bears on both sides of the ocean …

He was thinking so hard about all that that he had hardly touched his *cassis*. A little dust was rising on all sides. Some children with big bellies and smudged faces were wandering around under the plane trees; they

too were attracted by the phonograph records. Nobody can really resist music. You don't know what to do with your heart, you're glad to give it away. At the bottom of all music you have to hear the tune without notes, made just for us, the tune of Death.

A few shops still have the obstinacy to open on Sunday … the slipper woman comes out of her shop and parades her pounds of varicose veins from display to display, stopping to chat here and there.

At the newsstand the morning papers hang yellow and limp, an enormous artichoke of news going bad.

A dog takes a quick piss on them, the news woman is dozing.

An empty bus is heading back to its depot lickety split. Thoughts have their Sunday too, come to think of it. We're even more dazed than usual. Here we sit, empty, bewildered, contented. We have nothing to talk about, because nothing happens to us anymore, we're too poor, maybe life is sick of us. Why not?

"Can't you think of something I could do to get out of this job that's killing me?" He had surfaced from his reflections.

"I want to get out of that racket, see? I'm sick of working like a mule … I want to roam around too … Wouldn't you know somebody who needs a chauffeur by any chance? … You know so many people …"

Sunday ideas, gentleman's ideas had come over him. I was afraid to argue, to insinuate that no one would entrust his motorcar to a man with the mug of an impoverished murderer, that with or without a uniform he would always look too peculiar.

"You're not very encouraging, are you?" he said. "So you think I'll never get out of the ditch? … You think there's not even any point in my trying? … In America you said I was too slow … In Africa I couldn't stand the heat … Here I'm not intelligent enough … But that's all a lot of hooey, you can't tell me different! If only I had plenty of money! … Everybody would think I was adorable … here … there … and everywhere … Even in America … Ain't it the truth? What about you? … All we need is to own an apartment house with half a dozen tenants paying good stiff rents …"

"You've got something there," I said.

He had come to that major conclusion all by himself, and he couldn't get over it. Then he gave me a funny look, as if he had suddenly discovered something too-too nauseating about me.

"Come to think of it," he said, "you've got the good end. You sell your hokum to sick people, and you haven't a thing to worry about … Nobody riding you … You come and go when you like, you're free … You're nice enough on the surface but what a bastard underneath!"

"You're unjust, Robinson …"

"All right, then find me something …"

He was determined to pass on his acid job to someone else …

We started off through the little side streets. In the late afternoon you'd think Rancy was a village. The big house door is ajar. The yard is empty, and so is the dog's kennel. One afternoon like this, years ago, the peasants left their homes, driven away by the city creeping out from Paris. There are only one or two taverns left from those days, unsalable, crumbling away, overgrown by limp wisteria vines, hanging down over walls reddened with posters. The grating hung between two gargoyles has rusted till it can't rust anymore. All this past?nobody touches it anymore. It's dying without any help from anyone. The present tenants are much too tired when they come home at night to do anything about the outside of their house. They just pile up, family by family, in what's left of the common rooms and drink. The ceiling is marked with rings of smoke left by the wobbly hanging lamps of those days. The whole neighborhood is shaken uncomplaining by the continuous rumble of the new factory. Moss-covered tiles crash down on high, humpbacked cobblestones, the kind you'll find today only in Versailles and in venerable prisons. Robinson accompanied me to the little town park hemmed in by warehouses, where all the strays in the neighborhood come and misbehave on the mangy lawn, on the senile *boules* ground, around the incomplete Venus, and on the sandpile for playing and peeing.

The conversation started up again, about this and that. "My trouble is that drink doesn't agree with me." A bee in his bonnet. "When I drink, I get cramps, it's unbearable. Worse!" And by throwing up several times he demonstrated that even our little *cassis* that afternoon hadn't agreed with him. "See what I mean?"

He left me outside his door. “The Palace of Drafts,” he said and vanished. I thought I wouldn’t be seeing him for a while.

That night it looked as if my business might be picking up.

I got two urgent calls from the same house, the one over the police station. On Sunday evening everybody lets go … their sighs, their feelings, their impatience. Human dignity goes on a holiday spree. After a whole day of alcoholic freedom the slaves are stirring, there’s no holding them, they sniff, they snort, they clank their chains … In the house over the police station two tragedies were in progress at once. On the second floor a man was dying of cancer, on the fourth there had been a miscarriage that was more than the midwife could handle. That worthy matron was giving everybody absurd advice, all the while washing out napkins and more napkins. Between two douches she’d slip away to give the cancer patient downstairs an injection, at ten francs an ampule, of camphorated oil if you please. A good day for her.

Every family in the house had spent the day in dressing gowns and shirt sleeves, lending a helping hand, well reinforced by highly seasoned food. Every stairway and corridor smelled of garlic and other more obscure odors. The dogs were having a fine time, running up as far as the seventh floor. The concierge was determined to keep abreast of events. You couldn’t move without running into her. She only drank white wine, because red wine gives you discharges.

The elephantine midwife in her smock was directing both tragedies, on the second floor and on the fourth, bounding, sweating, delighted, vindictive. My arrival infuriated her. She had been holding her audience since morning, she was the star.

I tried my best to spare her feelings, to make myself as inconspicuous as possible, to approve of everything (when in reality everything she had done was preposterous), but my being there and every word I said went against her grain. It was to be expected. A supervised midwife is as friendly as a hangnail. You can’t think of any place to put her where she’ll do as little harm as possible. From the kitchen the family overflowed through the apartment and out on to the staircase, where they mingled with the relatives of other tenants. And what multitudes of relatives! Fat ones and thin ones gathered in somnolent clusters under the hanging lamps. It was getting late, and more were arriving from the provinces where people go to bed earlier than in Paris. They were fed up. Everything I said to the relatives of those tragedies … upstairs and down … was taken amiss. The death agony on the second floor didn’t last long. Which had its good side and bad side. Just as his last gasp was coming up, Dr. Omanon, his regular doctor, drops in to see if his patient was dead, and starts bawling me out or pretty near for being there at the bedside. I explained to Omanan that I was on municipal Sunday duty, so my presence was perfectly natural. Whereupon, with dignity, I climbed up to the fourth floor.

Upstairs the woman’s ass was still bleeding. It wouldn’t have surprised me if she too had taken it into her head to die without bothering to wait. A minute to give her an injection, and down again to Omanon’s patient. It was definitely all over. Omanon had just left. But the bastard had pocketed my twenty francs. Another dud. After that I was determined to stick to my post beside the miscarriage. So I ran upstairs as fast as I could. Her vulva was still bleeding, and I explained a few things to the family. Naturally the midwife disagreed. It almost looked as if she were being paid for contradicting me. But there I was, I had to do something, who cared if she was happy or not? So let’s not fool around! This case was worth at least a hundred francs to me if I handled it right and stuck to my guns. A man of science keeps his temper, damn it! It’s hard work standing up to the remarks and questions steeped in white wine that hurtle implacably through the air over your innocent head … it’s no joke. Belching and sighing, the family impart their opinions. The midwife is waiting for me to make a fool of myself, clear out, and leave her the hundred francs. But the midwife has another think coming. What about my rent? Who’s going to pay it? This labor had been twiddling its thumbs since this morning, I won’t deny it. She’s bleeding, I won’t deny that either, but it’s not coming out, I’ve got to hold my ground.

Now that the cancer patient has died downstairs, his deathbed audience has crept up here. As long as you’re losing a night’s sleep, as long as you’re making the sacrifice, you may as well take in all the entertainment the neighborhood has to offer. The downstairs family comes up to see if maybe this tragedy is going to end as badly as theirs. Two deaths in the same house, on the same night, would be a sensation to last them a lifetime. Nothing less. Everybody’s dogs can be heard tinkling their bells as they scamper up and down the stairs. They come in too. More people from far away pour in, whispering. Some teenage girls have suddenly discovered the “facts of life,” as their mothers put it and now, in the face of tragedy, they’re putting on a tenderly knowing air. The female consoling instinct. A cousin has been watching them since morning. He’s fascinated, he hasn’t stirred from their side. They come as a revelation in his fatigue. Everyone’s clothes are askew. The cousin will marry one of them, he wishes he could see their legs while he’s about it, to make it easier to choose.

The fetus refuses to come out, the passage must be dry, it won’t slip through, nothing but blood. This would have been her sixth child. Where’s the husband? I ask for him. The husband had to be found if I was going to

send his wife to the hospital. A relative had suggested the hospital. She had a family at home and wanted to get to bed on account of the children. But when the word hospital was brought up, they couldn't get together. Some were in favor, others were dead set against, because of what people would say. They wouldn't even hear of it. Some very hard words were exchanged between relatives, words that would never be forgotten and would go down in the family. The midwife despised everybody. What preoccupied me was finding the husband, I wanted to consult him, so we could make up our minds one way or the other. He finally emerges from one of the groups, even more undecided than everyone else. But the decision was up to the husband. Hospital?

No hospital? What does he think? He doesn't know. He wants to look. So he looks. I show him his wife's hole, the blood clots, the glug-glug, his whole wife seeping away. She's groaning like a big dog that's been run over by a car. He doesn't know what he wants. Somebody gives him a glass of white wine to pick him up. He sits down. He still can't make up his mind. He's a man who works hard all day. Everyone knows him in the market and especially at the freight station, where he totes sacks, and no small loads, big heavy things, been toting them for the last fifteen years. He's famous. His trousers are vast and shapeless, likewise his jacket. They don't fall off, but he doesn't seem to be very much attached to his trousers and jacket. He only seems attached to the earth and standing upright on it, with his two feet spread wide as if the earth were going to start quaking under him any minute. His name is Pierre.

We're all waiting. "Well, Pierre," they all ask him. "What do you think?" Pierre scratches himself and goes and sits down right next to his wife's face, as if he had trouble recognizing this woman who was always bringing so much pain into the world, and then he sheds a kind of tear and stands up. We all fire the same question. I make out a certificate of admission for the hospital. "Try and think, Pierre!" everyone pleads. He tries but makes a sign meaning it won't come. He gets up and staggers out to the kitchen, taking his glass with him. Why wait any longer? That husband's indecision, everybody realized, was likely to go on all night. We might as well be going.

For me it was a hundred francs lost, that's all. But one way or another I'd have had trouble with the midwife … that was sure. On the other hand, I wasn't going to risk any surgical manipulations in front of all those people and in my state of fatigue. "Too bad," I said to myself. "No use hanging around. Maybe next time … May as well resign myself … Let nature take her course, the bitch!"

I'd hardly reached the stairs when they all called me back and he came running after me.

"Hey, doctor!" he yelled, "don't go!"

"What do you want me to do?" I asked him.

"Wait, I'll go with you, doctor! … Please, doctor!"

"All right," I said, and let him go down with me. I was in the lead, so I stopped at the second floor to say good-bye to the dead cancer patient's family. The husband went into the room with me, and we came right out again. In the street he fell into step with me. There was a nip in the air. We came across a puppy who was practicing how to answer the other dogs of the Zone with long howls. He was very persistent and very plaintive. He had already mastered the art. He'd soon be a real dog.

"Hey, that's Egg Yolk," says the husband, delighted at recognizing him and at changing the subject … "The daughters of the laundryman on the Rue des Gonesses brought him up on a baby's bottle … Do you know the laundryman's daughters?"

"Yes," I said.

As we were walking he told me about ways they had of feeding puppies on milk without its costing too much. But behind those words he was looking all the while for an idea in connection with his wife.

A bar was open near the Porte.

"Coming in, doctor? I'll buy you a drink."

I wasn't going to hurt his feelings. "All right," I said. "Two coffees." I took the opportunity to talk about his wife. My talking about her turned him dead serious, but I still couldn't get him to make up his mind. There was a big bouquet on the bar counter. For Martrodin's birthday, Martrodin was the owner. "A present from the children," he himself told us. So we had a vermouth with him and drank his health. The Drunkenness Law and a framed school diploma were hanging on the wall. When he saw that, the husband absolutely insisted on the owner reciting the Subprefectures of the Loir-et-Cher Department, because he had learned them in school

and still knew them. Then he claimed it wasn't the owner's name on the diploma but somebody else's, that made the owner sore, so the husband came back and sat with me. He was in the throes of doubt again, so tormented that he didn't even see me leave …

I never saw that husband again. Never. I was badly disappointed by the events of that Sunday and tired besides.

I had hardly gone a hundred yards in the street when I saw Robinson coming my way, loaded down with all kinds of boards, big ones and little ones. I recognized him in spite of the darkness. He was embarrassed at seeing me and tried to get away, but I stopped him.

"Why aren't you in bed?" I asked him.

"Not so loud!" he said. "I've come from the building site …"

"And what are you doing with all that wood? Building what? A coffin … You stole it, I bet?"

"No. A rabbit hutch …"

"You raising rabbits now?"

"No, it's for the Henrouilles …"

"The Henrouilles? They've got rabbits?"

"Yes, three. They're going to keep them in the little yard, you know, where the old woman lives …"

"You're fixing to build them a rabbit hutch at this time of night? Funny time to …"

"It was his wife's idea …"

"Some idea! … What's she going to do with rabbits? Sell them? Make top hats?"

"You'll have to ask her when you see her. As long as she comes across with the hundred francs, I …"

This business with the rabbit hutch struck me as very odd … at that time of night. I kept at him.

He changed the subject.

"But what were you doing at their house?" I asked. "You didn't know the Henrouilles."

"The old lady took me to see them … that day I met her in your office … The old woman is a big talker once she gets started … You can't imagine … No getting away from her … So now I'm sort of pals with her and with them too … Some people like me, you know …"

"You never said a word about all that … But since you see them, maybe you know if they're managing to get the old woman committed …"

"No, not from what they tell me …"

He wasn't enjoying this conversation at all, I could feel that, he didn't know how to get rid of me. But the slipperier he got the more I wanted to know …"

"Life is hard, you got to admit it … the things a man has to do …" he said vaguely. But I brought him back to the subject. I was determined to make him come clean …

"They say the Henrouilles have more money than meets the eye … What do you think, now that you've been seeing them?"

"Yes, maybe they have, but one thing is sure, they want to get rid of the old woman." Robinson had never been much good at deception.

"It's because of the cost of living, you know, that keeps going up … that's why they want to get rid of her. They told me one time that you refused to certify her … Is that true?" Then quickly, without insisting on an answer, he asked me which way I was going.

"Been visiting a patient?"

I told him something about my adventures with the husband I had just lost by the wayside. That gave him a good laugh, but it also made him cough.

His cough doubled him up so bad I could hardly see him though he was right next to me. All I could vaguely make out was his hands, folded in front of his mouth like a big livid flower, trembling in the night. He couldn't stop. "It's the drafts," he finally said when the cough had spent itself and we'd come to the door of his house.

"One thing my pad is full of is drafts! And fleas! Have you got fleas in your place too?" I had. "Naturally," I told him. "I bring them home from my patients."

"Sick people smell of piss, don't they?" he said.

"Yes, and sweat …"

"All the same," he said slowly after thinking it over. "I'd have liked to be a hospital orderly."

"Why?"

"I'll tell you … because people with nothing wrong with them, you can't get around it, are frightening … Especially since the war … I know what they're thinking … They don't always know it themselves … but I know what they're thinking … As long as they're up, they think about killing you … but when they're sick, no two ways, they're not as frightening … You've got to be prepared for anything, I tell you, as long as they're up. Don't you see it that way?"

"Yes," I had to say.

"Is that why you decided to become a doctor?" he asked.

Thinking it over, I realized that maybe Robinson was right. But then he had another of his coughing fits.

"Your feet are wet," I said. "You'll come down with pleurisy wandering around like this at night. Go home," I advised him. "Go to bed."

His nerves were on edge from all that coughing.

"I wouldn't be surprised if Grandma Henrouille came down with the flu," he said, laughing and coughing into my ear.

"What makes you say that?"

"You'll see," he said.

"What have they dreamed up now?"

"That's all I can tell you. You'll see …"

"Come on, Robinson, you stinker, tell me. You know I never repeat anything …" Suddenly he wanted to make a clean breast of it, maybe in part to convince me that he wasn't as resigned and lily-livered as he looked.

"Go on!" I prodded him in a whisper. "You know I never talk …" That was all the encouragement he needed.

"That's a fact," he admitted. "You know how to keep your mouth shut." And right away he starts to come seriously clean. You wanted it, here it is …

There wasn't a soul around us at that time of night on the Boulevard Coutumance.

"Do you remember," he starts in, "the story about those carrot peddlers?" Offhand I didn't remember any story about carrot peddlers.

"Come off it," he insists. "You know … You told me the story yourself!"

"That's right!" … All at once it came back to me. "The brakeman on the Rue des Brumaires? … The one who got his balls blown off while stealing rabbits?"

"Yes, that's it, from the grocer on the Quai d'Argenteuil …"

“Yes,” I say. “I remember now. So what?”

I still didn’t see the connection between that ancient incident and Grandma Henrouille. He came out with it soon enough.

“Don’t you see?”

“No,” I said. But soon I was afraid to see.

“You’re being awfully slow …”

“It’s just that it looks like a nasty business for you to be getting into. You can’t be going to murder Grandma Henrouille just to please the daughter-in-law?”

“Of course not. I’m just building the rabbit hutch they asked for … The fireworks are up to them … They’ll do the rest … if they want to …”

“How much have they given you for all this?”

“A hundred francs for the wood and two-fifty for my work and a thousand more for the idea … And, you understand … this is only a beginning … a story like that … if properly told … is as good as a pension! … Well, son … now do you see?” I saw very well, and I wasn’t surprised. It only made me sad, a little sadder than before. Anything you can say to dissuade people in a case like that is bound to be feeble. Has life been kind to them? So why would they take pity on anybody? What for? What are other people to them? Has anybody ever been known to go down to hell to take someone else’s place? No. They send other people down, that’s all.

The vocation for murder that had suddenly come over Robinson struck me in a way as an improvement over what I’d observed up until then in others, always half hateful, half benevolent, always boring with their vagueness, their indirection. I had definitely learned a thing or two by following Robinson in the night.

But there was a danger: the Law. “The Law is dangerous,” I told him. “If you’re caught, you with the state of your health, you’ll be sunk … You’ll never leave prison alive … It’ll kill you …”

“That’s just too bad,” he said. “I’m fed up with honest work … I’m getting old … still waiting my turn to have some fun, and when it comes … if it does, with plenty of patience … I’ll have been dead and buried long ago … Honest work is for suckers … You know that as well as I do …”

“Maybe … but crime, you know, everybody’d go in for it if there weren’t risks … And the police are rough … There’s the pro and con …” We examined the situation.

“I won’t say different, but doing my kind of work, in my condition, coughing, not sleeping, doing jobs that no horse would touch … Nothing worse can happen to me now … That’s how I feel about it … Nothing …”

I didn’t dare tell him that all in all he was right, because he’d have held it up to me later on if his new racket misfired.

To cheer me up he listed a few good reasons why I shouldn’t worry about the old woman, first of all because any way you looked at it she hadn’t long to live, she was already too old as it was. He would just be arranging for her departure.

All the same it was a very nasty business. The whole thing had been worked out between him and the couple. Seeing the old woman had taken to leaving her shack, they’d send her to feed the rabbits one evening … The fireworks would be carefully placed … They’d go off full in her face the moment she touched the door … Exactly what happened at the grocer’s … The neighborhood people already thought she was mad, the accident wouldn’t come as a surprise to anybody … They’d say they had warned her never to go near the rabbits … And she had disobeyed them … At her age there was certainly no chance of her surviving an explosion like the one they were fixing for her … right square in the puss. No two ways, that was some story I had told Robinson.

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And the music came back with the carnival, the music you've heard as far back as you remember, ever since you were little, that's always playing somewhere, in some corner of the city, in little country towns, wherever poor people go and sit at the end of the week to figure out what's become of them. "Paradise" they call it. And music is played for them, sometimes here, sometimes there, from season to season, it tinkles and grinds out the tunes that rich people danced to the year before. It's the mechanical music that floats down from the wooden horses, from the cars that aren't cars anymore, from the railways that aren't at all scenic, from the platform under the wrestler who hasn't any muscles and doesn't come from Marseille, from the beardless lady, the magician who's a butter-fingered jerk, the organ that's not made of gold, the shooting gallery with the empty eggs. It's the carnival made to delude the weekend crowd.

We go in and drink the beer with no head on it. But under the cardboard trees the stink of the waiter's breath is real. And the change he gives you has several peculiar coins in it, so peculiar that you go on examining them for weeks and weeks and finally, with considerable difficulty, palm them off on some beggar. What do you expect at a carnival? Gotta have what fun you can between hunger and jail, and take things as they come. No sense complaining, we're sitting down, aren't we? Which ain't to be sneezed at. I saw the same old Gallery of the Nations, the one Lola caught sight of years and years ago on that avenue in the park of Saint-Cloud. You always see things again at carnivals, they revive the joys of past carnivals. Over the years the crowds must have come back time and again to stroll on the main avenue of the park of Saint-Cloud … taking it easy. The war had been over long ago. And say, I wonder if that shooting gallery still belonged to the same owner? Had he come back alive from the war? I take an interest in everything. Those are the same targets, but in addition, they're shooting at airplanes now. Novelty. Progress. Fashion. The wedding was still there, the soldiers too, and the town hall with its flag. Everything. Plus a few more things to shoot at than before.

But the people were getting a lot more fun out of the Dodge'em cars, a recent invention, because of the collisions you kept having and the terrible shaking they gave your head and innards. More howling lunatics kept pouring in for the pleasure of smashing ferociously into one another and getting scattered in all directions and fracturing their spleens at the bottom of their tubs. Nothing would make them stop. They never begged for mercy, it looked as if they'd never been so happy. Some were delirious. They had to be dragged away from their smash-ups. If they'd been offered Death as an extra attraction for their franc, they'd have gone right in. At about four o'clock the town band was supposed to play in the middle of the carnival ground. It took some doing to collect the musicians, because of the neighborhood bars, all of which wanted a turn at them. A last one was always missing. The rest waited. Some went looking for him. While waiting for them to come back, the others would be stricken with thirst and two more would disappear. They had to start all over again.

Incrusted with dust, the gingerbread pigs turned into relics and gave the prize-winners a devastating thirst.

Family groups are waiting for the fireworks before going home to bed. Waiting is part of the carnival too. Thousands of empty bottles jiggle and clink in the shadow under the tables. Restless feet consent or say no. The tunes are so familiar you hardly hear the music or the wheezing motor-driven cylinders behind the booths, which put life into things it costs two francs to see. When you're tipsy with fatigue your heart pounds in your temples. Bim! Bim! It beats against the velvet around your head and inside your ears. One of these days you'll burst. So be it! One of these days, when the movement inside catches up with the movement outside, when your thoughts scatter far and wide and rise up at last to play with the stars.

A lot of crying went on all over the carnival, children getting accidentally squeezed between chairs and others being taught to resist their longings, to forego the enormous little pleasure of another ride on the merry-go-round. For character building the carnival hasn't its equal. It's never too soon to start. The little darlings don't know yet that everything costs money. They think it's pure generosity that makes the grownups behind the brightly lit counters incite the public to treat themselves to the marvels which they have amassed and which they guard with their raucous smiles. Children don't know the law. Their parents slap them to teach them the law and protect them from pleasure.

There's never a real carnival except for the shopkeepers, and then it's deep down and secret. The shopkeeper rejoices at night when all the unsuspecting yokels, the public, the profit fodder, have gone home, when silence returns to the avenue and the last dog has squirted his last drop of urine at the Japanese billiard table. That's when the accounts are totted up, when the shopkeepers register their receipts and take stock of their powers and their victims.

On the last Sunday evening of the carnival, Martrodin's barmaid cut her hand pretty badly cutting sausage.

Late that night, the things around us suddenly became quite distinct, as if they were sick of wobbling from one side of fate to the other and had all come out of the shadow at once and started talking to me. But you'd better not trust things and people at such times. You think objects are going to talk but they don't say a thing, and often enough the night swallows them up before you can understand what they were trying to tell you. Anyway that's been my experience.

Be that as it may, I ran into Robinson that same night at Martrodin's café just as I was getting ready to dress the barmaid's wound. I remember the circumstances exactly. There were some Arab customers nearby, a whole raft of them were dozing on the benches. They didn't seem interested in anything that was going on around them. Speaking to Robinson, I was careful not to bring up our conversation of the other night, when I'd caught him carrying boards. I had trouble sewing up the barmaid's cut, because I couldn't see very well at the back of the bar. I had to pay close attention and that kept me from talking. As soon as I'd finished, Robinson drew me into a corner and informed me without my asking that everything was all set for his scheme, it would be coming off soon. His telling me that didn't suit me at all, I could have easily done without it.

"Soon? What?"

"You know as well as I do."

"What? The same old business?"

"Guess how much they're giving me?"

I had no desire to guess.

"Ten thousand! … Just to hold my tongue!"

"That's a lot of money!"

"It'll save my life, that's all," he said. "Those are the ten thousand francs I've needed all along! … The first ten thousand! … See? … I've never really had a trade, but now with ten thousand francs! …"

He must have started blackmailing them already …

He listed his projects, all the things he'd be able to do with ten thousand francs … Leaning against the wall, in the shadow … He gave me time to think about them. A new world. Ten thousand francs!

Yes, but thinking it over, I wondered if I wasn't running some risk myself, if I wasn't slipping into some sort of complicity by not trying to talk him out of his scheme. Actually I should have reported him. Not that I gave a damn about morality, any more than anyone else. What business was it of mine? But all the nasty stories, all the complications the law stirs up when a crime has been committed, just to entertain the taxpayer, the prurient bastard! … When that happens, it's hard to clear yourself … I'd seen it happen … Trouble for trouble, I preferred the quiet kind that's not splashed all over the newspapers. To make a long story short, I was fascinated and horrified at the same time. I'd gone this far, and once again I hadn't the courage to get really to the bottom of things. Now that the time had come to open my eyes in the darkness, I almost preferred to keep them shut. But Robinson seemed to want me to open them, to know all about it.

To change the subject a bit, as we roamed around the room, I started talking about women. He didn't think much of women.

"You know," he said, "I can get along fine without women, their big asses, their fat thighs, their rosebud lips, their bellies that always have something growing in them, if it's not a brat it's a disease … Their smiles won't pay your rent for you! Take me in my pad; if I had a woman, it wouldn't do me a bit of good to show the landlord her ass on the fifteenth of the month, he wouldn't reduce the rent! …"

Robinson had a thing about independence. He said so himself. But Martrodin was getting sick of our private conversation, our little plots in the corner.

"Robinson, dammit, the glasses!" he sings out. "Do you expect me to wash them for you?" Robinson starts up.

"You see," he informs me, "I'm filling in here." It was carnival time all right. Martrodin was having a hard time counting up the take, it was getting on his nerves. The Arabs left except for the two who were still dozing by the door.

"What are they waiting for?"

“The barmaid,” says Martrodin.

“How’s business?” I asked to be saying something,

“Pretty fair … But it’s not easy! See, doctor, I bought this place for sixty thousand before the crash. I’d need to get at least two hundred out of it … See what I mean? … It’s true, the place is full, but it’s mostly Arabs … And those people don’t drink … They haven’t caught the habit yet … Poles is what I need … Take it from me, doctor, the Poles are drinkers … In the Ardennes where T was before, I had Poles, they worked in the enameling ovens, get the idea? … Those ovens really heated them up! … That’s what we need here! … Thirst! … On Saturdays they spent everything they had! … Christ! That was something! Their whole pay! Bing! … These greasers here aren’t interested in drinking, they’re more interested in buggering each other … It seems drinking’s prohibited by their religion and buggery isn’t …”

Martrodin had it in for the Arabs. “A bunch of perverts! It seems they even do it to my barmaid! … They’re fanatics! … Crazy way to behave! Doctor, I ask you …” With his stubby fingers Martrodin squeezed the little serous pouches he had under his eyes.

“How are your kidneys doing?” I asked him when I saw him doing that. I was treating him for his kidneys. “I hope you’ve cut out the salt at least.”

“There’s still some albumen, doctor. I had the pharmacist analyze it only the other day … Oh, I don’t care if I conk out, from albumen or something else, what bugs me is working the way I do … for practically nothing …”

The barmaid had finished washing her dishes, but her bandage had got so greasy I had to change it … She held out a five-franc note. I didn’t want to accept her five francs, but she insisted. Her name was Severine.

“Why, Séverine,” I observed. “You’ve had your hair cut.”

“Had to,” she says. “It’s the style. And besides, with the cooking in this place, long hair picks up all the smells …”

“Your ass smells a damn sight worse!” Martrodin breaks in. Our chatter was interfering with his accounts. “And it doesn’t keep your customers away …”

“Yes, but it’s not the same thing,” says Séverine, who was good and mad. “Every part has its own smell … And look here, boss, you want me to tell you what you smell like … Not just one part, all over?”

Séverine was really worked up. Matrodin didn’t want to hear the rest. He just grumbled and went back to his wretched accounts.

Séverine’s feet were so swollen from the day’s work that she couldn’t manage to get out of her felt slippers and into her shoes. She prepared to leave in her slippers.

“I’ll sleep all right with them on,” she finally said aloud.

“Go put the light out in back!” Martrodin ordered her. “Anybody could guess that you don’t pay the light bills,”

“I’ll sleep all right,” Séverine repeated with a sigh, as she was getting up. Martrodin was still at his accounts. To reckon better he’d taken off his apron, then his vest. He was sweating blood. From the invisible depths of the bar we could hear a clatter of saucers, that was Robinson and the other dishwasher at work. Martrodin was tracing his big childish numbers with a blue pencil squeezed between his thick murderer’s fingers. In front of us the barmaid was dozing, sprawled all over her chair. Now and then she’d regain a spark of consciousness in her sleep.

“Oh, my feet! Oh, my feet!” she’d say and fall back into her dose. But then Martrodin woke her with a yell.

“Hey, Séverine! Get your greasers out of here! I’m sick of them! … Clear out, the whole lot of you, Christ almighty! It’s time!”

The Arabs didn’t seem to be in any hurry at all in spite of the hour. Séverine finally woke up. “It’s true I gotta go,” she finally agreed. “Thanks, boss.” She took both greasers along with her. They had joined forces to pay her.

“I’ll do them both tonight,” she told me as she was leaving. ” ‘Cause next Sunday I won’t be able to on account

of I'm going to Acheres to see my kid. 'Cause next Saturday is visiting day."

The Arabs got up and followed her. They didn't seem the least bit insolent. Still, Séverine looked at them kind of dubiously because she was so tired. "I don't agree with the boss," she says. "I like greasers better. Arabs aren't brutal like Poles, but they're perverts … Boy, are they perverts! … Well, let 'em do what they please, I don't think that'll keep me from sleeping!" - "All right, boys!" she called them. "Let's go!" Off they go, all three, she a step or two ahead of them. We saw them cross the square, littered with the wreckage of the carnival, the last gas lamp at the end whitened their group for an instant, and then the night took them in. We heard their voices for a while and then nothing at all. There was nothing left.

I left the bistrot without talking to Robinson again. Martrodin bade me a polite good night. A policeman was pacing the boulevard. In passing each other we stirred up the silence. Here and there the sound startled a shopkeeper bogmired in his aggressive figuring, like a dog gnawing a bone. A family on a bender filled the whole street, yelling on the corner of the Place Jean-Jaurès. They weren't getting ahead at all, they stood at the end of an alley, hesitating to go in, like a fishing fleet in a gale. The father went stumbling from one side of the street to the other and couldn't seem to stop urinating.

The night had come home.

I remember another night about that time because of what happened. First, shortly after dinnertime, I heard an enormous sound of garbage cans being moved. People often made a racket with the garbage cans in my stairway. Then a woman moaning, sighing. I opened my door a crack, but I didn't move.

If I came out after an accident without being called, they'd probably think of me as a helpful neighbor, and my medical assistance wouldn't have to be paid for. If they wanted me, they'd just have to send for me officially, and then it would cost them twenty francs. Poor people persecute altruism implacably, meticulously, and the kindest impulses are punished without mercy. So I waited for someone to ring my bell, but no one came. For reasons of economy no doubt.

I had almost stopped waiting when a little girl appeared at my door, trying to read the names on the bells. As it turned out, she was looking for me. Madame Henrouille had sent her.

"Who's sick?" I asked.

"A gentleman. He's hurt himself …"

"A gentleman?" I thought of Henrouille himself,

"The husband? … Monsieur Henrouille?"

"No … A friend, but he's in their house …"

"Somebody you know?"

No, she'd never seen this friend.

It was cold out, the child ran, I walked fast.

"How did it happen?"

"I don't know."

We skirted a small park, the remains of an old forest, where at night the long, slow winter mists would catch between the trees. One little street after another. We soon came to the house. The child didn't say good-bye to me, she was afraid to go nearer. Madame Henrouille, the daughter-in-law, was standing on the front steps under the awning, waiting for me. Her oil lamp was flickering in the wind.

"This way, doctor … This way …" she called out.

"Has your husband hurt himself?" I asked her.

"Go right in!" she said rather brusquely, without even giving me time to think. I ran smack into the old woman, who began to yap and light into me while I was still in the hallway. A broadside.

"Oh, the monsters! The bandits! Doctor! They tried to kill me!" So they'd come a cropper.

“Kill you?” I said with an air of surprise. “Why would they want to do that?”

“Because I was taking too long to die! Use your brains, dammit! Naturally I don’t want to die!”

“Mother! Mother!” the daughter-in-law broke in. “You’ve taken leave of your wits! How can you say such awful things to the doctor!”

“Awful things, is it? Well, you slut, you’ve got an all-fired nerve! Taken leave of my wits, have I? I’ve got wits enough to see the whole lot of you hanged! Believe you me!”

“But who’s hurt? Where is he?”

“You’ll see who!” the old woman puts in. “The murderer! He’s upstairs on their bed! A fine mess he’s made of your bed, you hussy! Got his no-good blood all over your mattress! His blood, not mine! What filthy rotten blood that must be! You won’t wash that out in a hurry!

Take it from me, that murderer’s blood will stink for a long time to come! Some people go to the theater for excitement! Not us, we’ve got a theater right here! It’s upstairs, doctor!

Real theater, no make-believe. Don’t miss it! Hurry hurry! Maybe the dirty dog will be dead before you get there! And then you won’t see a thing!”

The daughter-in-law tried to hush her up, for fear she’d be heard on the street. In spite of the situation, the daughter-in-law didn’t seem terribly upset, only put out that their scheme had misfired, but her opinions were unchanged. In fact she was dead sure she’d been right.

“Oh doctor, listen to her! Isn’t it shameful! When I’ve always tried so hard to make her life pleasant! You know that! Didn’t I keep urging her to go and stay with the Sisters …” Hearing about the Sisters again was too much for the old woman.

“To Paradise! Yes, you slut, that’s where you all wanted to send me! Oh, you bandits! That devil upstairs! That’s why you and your husband brought him here! To kill me, that’s right, not to send me to any Sisters! He botched it, the man’s all thumbs if you ask me! Go on, doctor, go and see what that bastard upstairs has done to himself, oh yes, him and nobody else! … I hope he croaks! Go on, doctor! Go see him before it’s too late!” If the daughter-in-law didn’t seem dejected, the old woman was even less so. The plot had almost wiped her out, but she wasn’t as indignant as she put on. It was all an act. Actually that bungled murder had revived her, raised her up from the creeping tomb she’d been shut up in all those years at the back of the moldering garden. Late in life an indestructible vitality had come back and was running through her veins. She was indecently relishing not only her victory but also the prospect of having something to torment her mean-hearted daughter-in-law with for the rest of her life. She had her where she wanted her now. She was bent on my knowing every detail of the miscarried plot and how it had all happened.

“And do you know where I met that murderer?” she went on in the same exalted register, especially for my benefit. “In your waiting room! … That’s right, doctor, and I didn’t trust him! … I didn’t trust him this far! … Do you know what he first suggested to me? He wanted to bump you off, you bitch! That’s right, you slut! And cheap too! I assure you! He has the same propositions for everybody! It’s common knowledge! … So you see, you hussy, I know how he makes his living! I know all about him! His name is Robinson! … Deny it if you dare! … Tell me that’s not his name! … As soon as I saw him whispering in corners with you two, I had my suspicions … And a good thing too! … If I hadn’t been suspicious, where’d I be now?”

Over and over again the old woman told me how it had all happened. The rabbit had moved while he was fastening the fireworks to the door of the hutch. Meanwhile she had been watching him from her shack, she’d had a “ringside seat,” as she put it. The contraption was loaded with buckshot … it had gone off in his face while he was connecting it up, right in his eyes. “A man’s not easy in his mind when he’s plotting murder,” she concluded. “What would you expect?”

Anyway, for butter-fingered incompetence, it took the cake.

“That’s what they’ve done to men lately,” the old woman went on. “That’s right! Matter of habit! They have to kill to eat!

They’re not satisfied anymore to steal their daily bread! … Or kill their grandmothers! … Nobody’s ever seen anything like it! … Never! … It’s the end of the world! … Wickedness is all they’re good for! And you now! Up to your necks in it! … And him gone blind! You’ll have him on your hands for the rest of your days! … What do you think of that? … Him and his slimy tricks! …”

The daughter-in-law didn't say a word, but she must have worked out her plan. She was a really concentrated villain. While we were busy with our reflections, the old woman went looking through the rooms for her son.

"And you know, doctor, I have a son! Where's he got to? What's he up to now?" She staggered down the corridor, shaken by nonstop laughter.

Old people don't usually laugh so hard except in the bughouse. When you hear a thing like that, you wonder what the world's coming to. She was bent on finding her son. He'd escaped into the street. "All right, let him hide! He can live forever for all I care! Now he'll have to live with that scum upstairs, serves him right, live with the two of them, including our friend who'll never see again! And support him! Hee hee! Square in the face! I saw it! I saw it from start to finish! Boom boom! I saw it all right! And it wasn't a rabbit, I assure you! Damn it all, doctor, where's my son? Haven't you seen him? There's another dirty dog, always been even deeper than her, but now finally the viciousness of his crummy character has come out, oh yes, it's come out all right. It takes a long time for a low character like his to come out! But when it does, it's rotten to the core! You can't deny it, doctor! Something worth seeing!" She was having a fine time. She wanted to impress me with her superiority to the situation and to confound us all, to humiliate us, so to speak. She had hit on a good role and was working it for all it was worth. An emotional binge. Which is always a pleasure. There's no limit to our happiness as long as we're capable of playing a part. She was sick of old folks' jeremiads, the only part she'd been given in the last twenty years. She'd never let go of this new, virulent, unhoped-for role that had come her way. Old age means not having a passionate role to play anymore, seeing your theater fold up on you, so there's nothing but death to look forward to! All of a sudden the old woman's zest had come back to her with her new and ardent role: the avenger. She didn't want to die anymore, not in the least. She radiated the desire to live, the affirmation of life. In melodrama she had found new fires, real fire.

She was wanning herself, she had no desire to leave the new fire, to leave us. For a long while she had almost ceased to believe there was any fire. She hadn't known what to do to stop herself from dying at the back of her dim-witted garden. And then suddenly this tempest of hard hot reality had hit her.

"My death!" Grandma Henrouille was shrieking now. "That's something I want to see! Do you hear! I've still got my two eyes! I want to get a good look at it!" She never wanted to die! Never! That was definite! She had stopped believing in her death.

20

Everybody knows that such situations are hard to manage and that managing them is always very expensive. In the first place we didn't even know where to put Robinson. In the hospital? Obviously that would make for loose tongues, all sorts of gossip … Send him back to his pad? … Unthinkable, with his face in that condition. Like it or not, the Henrouilles had to keep him.

He lay in bed upstairs, in a pitiful state. He was terrified of being thrown out and prosecuted. Not hard to see why. It was one of those things that you really can't tell anyone about. We kept the blinds in his room carefully drawn, but people, the neighbors, started passing through that street more often than usual, just to look up at the shutters and ask for news of the injured man. We gave them news all right, we told them fairy stories. But how were we to stop them from smelling a rat? From gossiping? Besides, they embroidered on what we told them. How could we stop them from speculating? Luckily nobody had gone to the law. That was something. As far as his face was concerned, I was doing all right. The wound was very jagged and a lot of dirt had got into it, but no infection had set in. As for his eyes, I foresaw scars in the corneas, through which light would pass with difficulty, if at all.

We'd manage to patch up some sort of eyesight if there was anything left to patch. For the moment we'd concentrate on what was most urgent, above all we'd have to prevent the old woman from getting us all into trouble with her horrible yapping in front of the neighbors. True, most of them thought she was mad, but that doesn't always account for everything. If the police really started prying, God knew where it would lead us. Preventing the old woman from making a spectacle of herself in her little yard had become a ticklish business. We all took turns trying to calm her down. It was no good if she thought we were browbeating her, but gentleness didn't always work very well either. In a frenzy of vindictiveness, she was blackmailing us, neither more nor less.

I went to see Robinson at least twice a day. He groaned under his bandages as soon as he heard me climbing the stairs. He was really in pain, but not as much as he wanted me to think. He'd have cause, I foresaw, for much worse distress when he realized exactly what had happened to his eyes … I was evasive about the future. He complained of stinging in his eyelids. He thought that was what prevented him from seeing anything. The Henrouilles were taking good care of him, in accordance with my instructions. No trouble on that score.

Nobody mentioned the plot anymore. We didn't speak of the future either. As I was leaving them in the evening, we all took turns looking at one another, so intensely I always had a feeling that we were about to do away with one another once and for all. When I thought it over, that culmination struck me as logical and expedient. I could scarcely imagine the nights in that house. But there they would be in the morning, and together we'd face the world together just where we left it together the night before. Madame Henrouille would help me renew the dressing with permanganate, and we'd open the blinds a bit as a test. The result was always the same. Robinson didn't even notice that we had just opened the blinds …

So the earth makes its way through the vastly menacing, silent night. Every morning the son would welcome me with a little peasant phrase: "Well, well, doctor … Looks like another late frost!" he would observe, glancing up at the sky from under the little peristyle. As if the weather mattered. His wife would go out and try again to parley with her mother-in-law, but only succeed in redoubling her fury. While we kept Robinson's eyes bandaged, he told me about his beginnings in life. When he was eleven, his parents had apprenticed him to a high-class shoemaker. One day he delivered a pair of shoes to a lady customer, and she invited him to share a pleasure which up until then he had known only in his imagination. He was so horrified by what he had done that he never went back to his boss. In those days fucking a customer was still an unforgivable crime. Especially the lady's chemise, all of chiffon, had had a phenomenal effect on him. Thirty years later he remembered that chemise in every detail. The lady swishing through her apartment full of cushions and fringed portieres, her pink and perfumed flesh, had given young Robinson food for interminable and despairing comparisons to last him the rest of his life.

Yet a good many things had happened since. He'd seen continents and been through whole wars, but he'd never recovered from that revelation. It gave him pleasure to think about it, to tell me about the minute of youth he had enjoyed with the lady customer. "Having my eyes closed like this makes me think," he observed. "It's like a parade … Like having a movie show in my bean …" 1 didn't dare tell him that he'd have time to get awfully sick of his little movie show. Since all thought leads to death, a day would come when he'd see nothing else in his movie show.

Not far from the Henrouilles' house there was a little factory with a big engine in it. It shook their house from morning to night. And there were other factories a little further away that thumped and pounded the whole

time, even at night. “We’ll be gone when the roof caves in,” Henrouille would joke, but he was kind of worried all the same. “It’ll happen sooner or later!” It was true that bits of plaster were falling from the ceiling. An architect tried to reassure them, but whenever you stopped in that house to listen to what was going on, you felt as if you were on a ship, sailing from one fear to another. Passengers, shut up between decks, making plans even sadder than life, economizing and dreading the darkness as well as the light.

Henrouille would go up to the bedrooom after lunch to read a while to Robinson, as I’d asked him to. The days passed. He treated Henrouille, too, to the story about that marvelous lady customer he had laid in the days of his apprenticeship. After a while the story became a kind of collective joke for everyone in the house. That’s what happens to our secrets when we spread them abroad. There’s nothing terrible inside us or on earth or possibly in heaven itself except what hasn’t been said yet. We won’t be easy in our minds until everything has been said once and for all, then we’ll fall silent and we’ll no longer be afraid of keeping still. That will be the day.

In the weeks while his eyelids were suppurating, I was able to entertain him with fairy tales about his eyes and the future. Sometimes I’d pretend the window was closed when it was wide open and sometimes that it was very dark outside.

But one day when my back was turned he went to the window himself to see what was what, and before I could stop him he had slipped the bandage off his eyes. He hesitated for quite a while. He touched the window frame first on the right, then on the left. He couldn’t believe it, but in the end he had to. There was no getting around it.

“Bardamu!” he shouted. “Bardamu! It’s open! The window’s open, I tell you!”?I didn’t know what to say. I stood there like an idiot. He was holding both arms out of the window, in the fresh air. Naturally he couldn’t see a thing, but he felt the air. He stretched his arms out in his darkness as far as he could, as if he were trying to touch the end of it. He didn’t want to believe it. His own private darkness. I pushed him back into his bed and said things to comfort him, but he didn’t believe me anymore. He was crying. He, too, had come to the end. There was nothing more we could say to him. A time comes when you’re all alone, when you’ve come to the end of everything that can happen to you. It’s the end of the world. Even grief, your own grief, doesn’t answer you anymore, and you have to retrace your steps, to go back among people, it makes no difference who. You’re not choosy at times like that, because even to weep you have to go back where everything starts all over, back among people.

“What will you do with him when he’s better?” I asked the daughterin-law at lunch after this scene. They had asked me to stay and eat with them in the kitchen. Neither of them had any serious idea of how to get out of the mess they were in. The cost of buying him a pension terrified them, especially her, because she knew more about the price of arrangements for invalids. She had even gone to the Public Welfare and “taken steps.” Steps they avoided mentioning to me.

One evening after my second visit Robinson did everything he could think of to keep me with him, he wanted me to stay a bit later than usual. He went on rehashing all the memories he could muster about the things we had done and the places we had been together, even things we had never tried to remember before. He remembered things we had never had time to bring up. In his seclusion the world we had explored seemed to pour back on him with all the moans, the kindnesses, the old clothes, the friends we had left behind us; in his eyeless head he had opened a shop full of outworn emotions.

“I’ll kill myself!” he notified me when his misery seemed too great to bear. And yet he managed to bear his misery a little longer, like a weight that was much too heavy and infinitely useless, misery on a road where he met no one to whom he could speak of it, it was just too big and complicated. He couldn’t have explained this misery of his, it exceeded his education.

He was a natural-born coward, I knew it and so did he; he kept hoping we’d save him from the truth, but on the other hand I was beginning to wonder if there was anywhere such a thing as a real coward … It looks like any man has things he is willing to die for, quickly and gladly. Except that a chance to die pleasantly, the chance he’s looking for, doesn’t always materialize. So he goes off somewhere to die as best he can … He sticks around on earth and everybody takes him for a jerk and a coward, but the truth is that he simply lacks conviction. He only seems to be a coward.

Robinson was not prepared to die under the conditions offered. Under different conditions he might have been delighted.

All in all, death is something like marriage.

This particular death didn't appeal to him, that was the long and the short of it. Then he'd have to resign himself and accept his helplessness and distress. But for the moment he was frantically busy splotching his soul with misery and distress. Later he'd put order into his misery and then a real new life would begin. He'd have to.

"You may not believe me," he said to me that evening after dinner, piecing bits of memories together. "I've never had much of a gift for languages, but do you know, toward the end in Detroit I managed to carry on a bit of a conversation in English … I've forgotten it now, all except one little phrase … Two words … They've been coming back to me ever since this thing happened to my eyes … 'Gentlemen first!' That's just about all I can say in English now, I don't know why … of course, it's an easy thing to remember … 'Gentlemen first!" To take his mind off his troubles, we tried talking English together. We kept repeating

"Gentlemen first" over and over again like idiots a propos of everything and nothing. A private joke. In the end we even taught it to Henrouille, who'd come up for a while to keep tabs on us.

While stirring up memories, we started wondering what might be left of all that … of all the things we'd known together … We wondered what could have become of Molly, our sweet Molly … As for Lola, I'd just as soon have forgotten her, but come to think of it I'd have welcomed news of them all, even little Musyne while I was at it … who was probably living in Paris, nearby … practically next door, in fact … Still, I'd have had to bestir myself to find out about her … There were so many people whose names, mannerisms, and addresses I had lost, whose friendliness and even their smiles, after so many years and years of trouble and worrying about the next meal, must have turned into pathetic grimaces, like old cheeses … Even memories have their youth … When you let them grow old, they turn into revolting phantoms dripping with selfishness, vanity, and lies … They rot like apples … So we talked about our youth, mulling it over. We didn't trust it … Which reminded me, I hadn't been to see my mother in a long time … And those visits had never done my nervous system any good … When it came to sadness, my mother was worse than me … Still in her little shop, she seemed after all those years and years to make a point of piling up disappointments around her … When I went to see her, she'd say: "You know, Aunt Hortense died two months ago in Coutances … Maybe you should have gone … And Clémentin, you remember Clémentin? … The floor polisher who played with you when you were little … Well, they picked him up the day before yesterday on the Rue d'Aboukir … He hadn't eaten in three days …" Robinson's childhood had been so dismal he didn't know what to say when he thought of it. Except for the episode with the lady customer, he couldn't find anything, even in the far corners, that didn't make him sick with despair; it was like a house full of repugnant, foulsmelling objects: brooms, slop jars, housewives, and smacks in the face … Monsieur Henrouille had nothing to say of his own youth including his military service, except that he'd had his picture taken with a pompom, and that picture was still hanging over the wardrobe.

When he'd gone back down, Robinson told me how worried he was that he'd never get the promised ten thousand francs now … "Don't count on them!" was my advice. I thought it best to prepare him for that new disappointment.

Some bits of shot left over from the explosion kept surfacing at the edges of his wound. I removed them in several installments, a few each day. The pain was bad when I probed just above the conjunctiva.

We had taken every possible precaution, but the neighborhood people gossiped right and left all the same. Luckily Robinson suspected nothing, it would have made him a lot sicker than he was. No doubt about it, there was suspicion all around us. Moving about the house in her slippers, Madam Henrouille was quieter and quieter. You weren't expecting her and then she'd be right on top of you.

What with the reefs all around us, the least doubt could wreck us all. Then the whole ship would crack, split, crash, come apart at the seams, and wash up on the shore. Robinson, the grandmother, the fireworks, the rabbit, his eyes, the unlikely son, the murdering daughterin-law?we'd all end up with our garbage and our rotten secrets in the office of some furibund examining magistrate. I wasn't very pleased with myself. Not that I'd done anything positively criminal. I hadn't. But I felt guilty all the same. I was especially guilty of wishing deep down that this whole business would go on. In fact I couldn't see any objection to all of us together drifting deeper and deeper into the night. To tell the truth, there was no need of wishing, things were moving all by themselves, and moving fast.

The rich don't have to kill to eat. They "employ" people, as they call it. The rich don't do evil themselves. They pay. People do all they can to please them, and everybody's happy. They have beautiful women, the poor have ugly ones. Clothing aside, they're the product of centuries. Easy to look at, well fed, well washed. After all these years, life can boast no greater accomplishment.

It's no use trying, we slide, we skid, we fall back into the alcohol that preserves the living and the dead, we

get nowhere. It's been proved. After all these centuries of watching our domestic animals coming into the world, laboring and dying before our eyes without anything more unusual ever happening to them either than taking up the same insipid fiasco where so many other animals had left off, we should have caught on. Endless waves of useless beings keep rising from deep down in the ages to die in front of our noses, and yet here we stay, hoping for something … We're not even capable of thinking death through. The women of the rich, well fed, well lied to, well rested, tend to be good looking. That's a fact. And maybe, after all, it's enough. How do I know? Maybe that's a reason for living.

"Don't you think the women in America were prettier than the ones here?"?Robinson had been asking me things like that ever since he'd started chewing on his travels. He was getting curious, he even started talking about women.

I wasn't going to see him quite so often now, because about that time I was put in charge of a small neighborhood dispensary for tuberculosis. I may as well call a spade a spade, it brought in eight hundred francs a month. My patients were mostly people from the zone, that village of sorts, which never succeeds in picking itself entirely out of the mud and garbage, bordered by paths where precocious snotnosed little girls play hookey under the fences to garner a franc, a handful of French fries, and a dose of gonorrhea from some sex fiend. A setting for avant-garde films where the trees are poisoned with laundry and lettuces drip with urine on Saturday night. In those few months of specialized practice I performed no miracles. Miracles were sorely needed. But my patients weren't at all eager for me to perform miracles, they were banking on their tuberculosis to move them from the state of absolute misery in which they'd been moldering ever since they could remember to the state of relative misery conferred by microscopic government pensions. Their more or less positive sputum had been getting them periodically rejected for military service ever since the war. They got thinner and thinner, thanks to fever maintained by eating little, vomiting a lot, drinking enormous quantities of wine, and working in spite of it all, one day out of three, to tell the truth.

The hope of a pension possessed them body and soul. One day a pension would come to them like grace if only they had the strength to wait a little while before snuffing out completely. You can't know what it is to come back and wait for something if you haven't seen all the coming back and waiting poor people expecting a pension can do. While the rain came down outside, they'd spend whole afternoons and evenings hoping in the corridor and doorway of my rundown dispensary, stirring up their hopes of percentages, their longing for definitely positive sputum, genuine hundred-percent tubercular sputum. Their hope of getting cured came far behind their hope for a pension … Of course they also thought about getting cured, but very little, they were much too dazzled by their dreams of an income, however infinitesimal. This ultimate, uncompromising desire left room only for negligible wishes, and even their death became by comparison a side issue, a sporting risk. Death after all is only a matter of a few hours, a few minutes, but a pension is like poverty, it lasts a whole lifetime. Rich people are drunk in a different way, they can't understand this frenzy about security. Being rich is another kind of drunkenness, the forgetful kind. That, in fact, is the whole point of getting rich: to forget. Little by little I'd broken my bad habit of promising my patients good health. The prospect of getting well didn't thrill them. Good health can't be anything but second best. Getting well means you can work. Isn't that lovely? While a government pension, however negligible, is purely and simply divine.

When you have no money to offer the poor, you'd better keep your trap shut. If you talk to them about anything but money, you'll almost always be deceiving them, lying. It's easy to amuse the rich, all you need, for instance, is mirrors for them to see themselves in, because in the whole world there's nothing better to look at than the rich. To keep the rich cheerful all you've got to do is move them up a notch in the Legion of Honor every ten years, like a sagging tit, that'll keep them busy for another ten years. And that's the truth. My patients were poor and selfish; they were materialists, shrunk to the measure of their sordid hope that positive sputum streaked with blood would get them a pension. Nothing else meant a thing to them. Not even the seasons meant a thing. They were aware of the seasons only insofar as the seasons affected their cough and the state of their health; in the winter, for instance, you're a good deal more likely to catch cold than in the summer, but on the other hand you're more likely to spit blood in the springtime, and during the summer heat it's not difficult to lose as much as five pounds a week … Sometimes I heard them talking among themselves when they were waiting for their turn, and they thought I wasn't there … They told endless horror stories about me and lies that would make you blow your imagination out. Running me down like that probably picked them up, gave them some sort of mysterious courage that they needed to be more and more ruthless, hard and vicious, to stick it out, to last. Having someone they could slander, despise, and threaten seems to have made them feel better. And yet I did all I could to please them, I went to bat for them, I tried to help them, I gave them plenty of iodine to make them spit up their filthy bacilli, but I never succeeded in neutralizing their cussed-ness …

When I questioned them, they stood there in front of me, smiling like servants, but they didn't like me, mostly because I was helping them, but also because I wasn't rich, and having me for a doctor meant they were being

treated free of charge, which is never flattering for a sick person, even if he is hoping for a pension. No slander would have been too great for them to spread behind my back. Most of the doctors in the neighborhood had cars, I didn't, and to their way of thinking my walking was a kind of infirmity. If anyone gave them the slightest encouragement, something my colleagues were always glad to do, they'd avenge themselves, or so it seemed, for all my kindness, for my devotion and readiness to help. Which is perfectly normal. Nevertheless the time passed. One evening when my waiting room was almost empty, a priest came in to see me. I didn't know that priest, I almost showed him the door. I didn't like priests, I had my reasons, especially since the time they'd shanghaied me at San Tapeta. But hard as I tried to place this one, searching my mind for something definite to reproach him with, the fact is that I'd never seen him before. Still, he must, like me, have gone about quite a lot in Rancy by night, he lived nearby. Maybe he avoided me on his rounds. I thought it over. Maybe somebody had told him I didn't like priests. You could see that by the weaseling way he started his spiel. One thing is sure?we had never jostled each other around the same sickbeds. He had been officiating, he told me, at a church nearby for the last twenty years. Plenty of parishioners, but not many who paid. A kind of beggar, come to think of it. We had that much in common. The soutane he was wearing struck me as a most uncomfortable sort of drapery for plodding through the muck of the Zone. I said as much. I went so far as to stress the extravagant discomfort of such a garment.

"You get used to it," he said.

The impertinence of my remark didn't put him off, he became more affable than ever. Obviously he had something to ask of me. His voice seldom rose above a certain confidential monotone which, or so at least I imagined, came from his calling. While he was cautiously preambling, I tried to form a picture of all he did each day to earn his calories, all his grimaces and promises, pretty much like my own … And then, to amuse myself, I imagined him all naked at his altar … It's a good habit to get into: when somebody comes to see you, quick, reduce him to nakedness, and you'll see through him in a flash, regardless of who it is, you will instantly discern the underlying reality, namely, an enormous, hungry maggot. It's good sleight-of-the-imagination. His lousy prestige vanishes, evaporates. Once you've got him naked, you'll be dealing with nothing more than a bragging, pretentious beggar, talking drivel of one kind or another. It's a test that nothing can withstand. In a moment you'll know where you're at. There won't be anything left but ideas, and there's nothing frightening about ideas. With ideas nothing is lost, everything can be straightened out. Whereas it's sometimes hard to stand up to the prestige of a man with his clothes on. Nasty smells and mysteries cling to his clothes.

This Abbé had very bad teeth, decayed, discolored, ringed with greenish tartar, in short, a fine case of alveolar pyorrhea. I was going to talk to him about his pyorrhea, but he was too busy telling me things. The things he was telling me kept squirting against the stumps of his teeth under the impulsion of a tongue, no movement of which escaped me. In a number of spots the edges of his tongue were bruised and bleeding.

This kind of meticulous observation was a habit, you might say a hobby, of mine. When you stop to examine the way in which words are formed and uttered, our sentences are hard put to it to survive the disaster of their slobbery origins. The mechanical effort of conversation is nastier and more complicated than defecation. That corolla of bloated flesh, the mouth, which screws itself up to whistle, which sucks in breath, contorts itself, discharges all manner of viscous sounds across a fetid barrier of decaying teeth?how revolting! Yet that is what we are adjured to sublimate into an ideal. It's not easy. Since we are nothing but packages of tepid, half-rotted viscera, we shall always have trouble with sentiment. Being in love is nothing, it's sticking together that's difficult. Feces on the other hand make no attempt to endure or to grow. On this score we are far more unfortunate than shit; our frenzy to persist in our present state?that's the unconscionable torture. Unquestionably we worship nothing more divine than our smell. All our misery comes from wanting at all costs to go on being Tom, Dick or Harry, year in year out. This body of ours, this disguise put on by common jumping molecules, is in constant revolt against the abominable farce of having to endure. Our molecules, the dears, want to get lost in the universe as fast as they can! It makes them miserable to be nothing but "us," the jerks of infinity. We'd burst if we had the courage, day after day we come very close to it. The atomic torture we love so is locked up inside us with our pride.

Since I was silent, stunned by the thought of these biological ignominies, the Abbé, thinking he had me in his pocket, assumed a benevolent, almost familiar manner. With infinite precautions he broached the subject of my medical reputation in the neighborhood. My reputation, he gave me to understand, might have been better if I had taken a very different course at the start, during the first few months of my practice in Rancy.

"Don't forget, my dear doctor, that the sick are basically conservative … As you must doubtless know, they live in fear that heaven and earth will fail them …" In other words, I should have made my peace with the Church from the start. That was his eminently practical as well as spiritual conclusion. Not a bad idea. I was careful not to interrupt him but waited patiently for him to come to the point of his visit. The weather couldn't have been gloomier or more confidential. It was so vile, so coldly and emphatically vile, it gave you

the feeling that if you went out you'd never see the rest of the world again, that the world would have melted away in disgust.

My nurse had finally brought her case histories up to date, every last one. She had no excuse whatever for staying there listening to us. So she left us, but miffed, slamming the door behind her, and plunged into a furious downpour.

In the course of our conversation this priest told me his name, Abbé Protiste he called himself. Between exercises in evasiveness, he informed me that he and Madame Henrouille had for some time been taking steps with a view to getting the old woman and Robinson, the two of them together, into an inexpensive religious institution. They were still at it. Looking closely at this Abbé Protiste, I might have taken him for a salesman in a department store, maybe even a section manager, wet, greenish, and many times dried. There was something really plebeian in the humility of his insinuations. In his breath, too. When it comes to breath, I never go wrong. There was a man who ate too fast and drank white wine.

Madame Henrouille, he told me as a starter, had called on him at the presbytery soon after the incident so see if he could help them out of the mess they had got themselves into. In telling me that, he seemed to be looking for excuses, explanations, as if he were ashamed of his part in the affair. There was really no need of putting on airs on my account. I knew the lie of the land. He was simply joining us in the night, that's all. That was his lookout. Little by little, what with the money involved, this priest had developed an extraordinary crust. That too was his lookout! Since my dispensary was steeped in silence and night had settled on the Zone, he lowered his voice to a whisper, wanting to confide in me alone. But whisper or not, everything he said struck me as monstrous and intolerable, probably because of the quiet all around me, which seemed to be full of echoes. Or were they only in my head? "Hush!" I kept wanting to say in the intervals between his words. I was so frightened my lips trembled a little, and at the end of his sentences I made myself stop thinking.

Now that he had joined us in our terror, the priest didn't quite know how to go about following the four of us in the darkness. A small group. He wanted to know how many of us were already mixed up in the affair. And where we were headed. So that he too, hand in hand with his new friends, might direct his steps toward the goal we would have to reach all together or not at all. We were all in the same boat now. The priest would have to learn to walk in the dark like the rest of us. He was still unsteady on his pins. He asked me what he should do to keep from falling. He didn't have to come if he was afraid. We'd get to the end together, and then we'd know what we'd been looking for in our adventure. That's what life is, a bit of light that ends in darkness.

But on the other hand, maybe we'd never know, maybe we wouldn't find anything. That's death.

The essential for the moment was to grope our way carefully. At the point we had got to we couldn't go back. We had no choice. Their lousy justice with its Laws was everywhere, at the bend of every corridor. Madame Henrouille was holding the old woman's hand, her son and I were holding theirs and Robinson's as well. We were all in it together. I explained all that to the priest without delay. And he understood.

Like it or not, I told the Abbé, in our present situation it wouldn't do us a bit of good to be noticed and exposed by the passers-by, I made that very clear. If we met anybody, we should pretend to be just taking a walk. Those were the instructions. Act natural. So now the Abbé knew the ins and outs, he understood. He gave me an ardent handshake. Naturally he too was scared to death. A beginner. He hesitated, he floundered like an innocent. At that point there was neither road nor light, and in their place only words of caution, which we passed back and forth but didn't greatly believe in ourselves. The words people say to reassure each other at times like that fall on empty air. The echo sends back nothing, you've walked out on Society. Fear says neither yes nor no. Fear swallows up everything we say, everything we think.

Nor does it help at times like that to stare wide-eyed into the darkness. It's horror wasted, that's all. The night has taken everything, even the light of our eyes. It has drained us. Even so, we have to join hands or we'll fall. Day people can't understand us. Between them and us stands our fear, which will weigh on us until this thing ends one way or another and we can get back together, in death or life, with the other motherfuckers of this world. For the moment the Abbé had only to help us and find things out in a hurry, that was his job. Actually that's what he had come for, to knock himself out finding a home as quickly as possible, first for Grandma Henrouille and then for Robinson, with the nuns in the provinces. He thought such an arrangement possible, and so did I. Except we'd have to wait months for a vacancy, and we were sick of waiting. We were fed up.

The daughterin-law was quite right, the sooner the better. They should beat it and good riddance! So Protiste came up with another scheme which, I agreed on the spot, seemed most ingenious. Best of all, it would mean a commission for both of us, the priest and me. The arrangement was to go into effect almost immediately, and I'd have my own little part to play. It consisted in persuading Robinson to go south, to give him a bit of

friendly but firm advice.

Not knowing either the bottom or the underside of Protiste's scheme, I ought perhaps to have expressed certain reservations, tried to protect my friend a little … Because the scheme Abbé Protiste put forward was indeed pretty wild. But we were all so harried by circumstances that our chief concern was haste. I promised everything they asked, to help and to keep my mouth shut. Ticklish situations of this kind seemed to be nothing new to this Protiste, and something told me that he would make things a lot easier for me. But where were we to begin? We'd have to arrange for Robinson to leave quietly for the South. How would Robinson feel about the South? Not to mention leaving with the old woman, whom he had come very close to murdering … I'd insist … That's all! … He'd simply have to, for all sorts of reasons, not all of them very good, but sound, yes, sound …

The job that had been found for Robinson and the old woman in the South was certainly weird. In Toulouse. A beautiful city Toulouse! We'd be seeing Toulouse! We'd go visit them down there. I promised I'd go to Toulouse as soon as they were settled in their lodgings and their work and all.

Then, thinking it over, it bothered me a little that Robinson should be leaving so soon, but at the same time I was glad, mostly because for once I was making a bit of real profit on the deal. A thousand francs they were giving me. It was all settled. All I had to do was work up Robinson's enthusiasm for the South, convince him that there was no better climate for damaged eyes, that he'd be blissfully well off down there, and that all things considered he was pretty damn lucky to get off so easily. That ought to do it.

After five minutes of rumination along these lines, I myself was steeped in conviction and prepared for a decisive interview. Strike while the iron is hot, that's my opinion. After all, he'd be no worse off down there than here. Protiste's idea, when I thought it over, seemed perfectly reasonable. You've got to admit it, those priests know how to bury the worst scandals.

All things considered, the deal being offered Robinson and the old woman wasn't so bad. If I wasn't mistaken, it was some sort of mummy show. The mummies were in the cellar of some church, and tourists could visit them for a fee. A fine business, Protiste assured me. I almost believed him, and that made me a little jealous. It's not every day that you can get the dead to work for you.

I locked up the dispensary and started resolutely through the sludge with the priest, heading for the Henrouilles. This was really something new. A thousand francs' worth of hope! I had changed my mind about the priest. When we got to the house, we found the Henrouilles, man and wife, with Robinson in his room on the second floor. But what a state Robinson was in!

"So there you are!" he screeches frantically as soon as he hears my steps on the stairs.

"There's something going on! I can feel it! … Tell me the truth!" he gasps. He starts sniveling before I can say a word. The Henrouilles are making signs while he appeals to me for help: "A pretty mess!" I say to myself. "They're in too much of a hurry … Always have been! … They've broken it to him cold! Without preparation!

Without waiting for me! …"

Luckily I was able to retell the whole story, so to speak, in different words. Robinson was more than willing to see the same facts in a different light. All right by him. The priest in the hallway didn't dare come into the room. He was reeling with fright.

"Come in!" the daughterin-law finally called out. "Come right in! You're very welcome, Monsieur l'Abbé! You've caught a poor, stricken family, that's all! … The doctor and the priest! … Always together in life's most painful moments! Isn't that right?" She was making phrases. Her new-found hope of extricating herself from the shit and the darkness was making the old bag lyrical in her repulsive way.

The bewildered priest lost all control and started sputtering with excitement at some distance from the sickbed. His excitement communicated itself to Robinson, who resumed his raving: "They're lying! They're all lying to me!" he yelled. Talk! Talk! And about what? Appearances! Emotional outpourings. Always the same. Still, it sparked me up, revived my nerve. I drew the daughterin-law into a corner and put it to her plainly, because I saw that the only person capable of getting them out of this mess was yours truly. "A down payment!" I said to her. "And I want it now!" When there's no trust, as the saying goes, there's no reason to use kid gloves. She got the drift and deposited a thousand-franc note right in the middle of my palm. And then another to be on the safe side. I had thrown my weight. So while I was at it, I set to work, bringing Robinson around. He'd just have to go south, and that was that.

It's easy to speak of betrayal. But to betray somebody you need an opportunity, and once you have it you've

got to take it. It's like opening a window in jail. Everybody would like to, but you don't often get the chance.

Once Robinson had left Rancy, I thought things would pick up, for instance that I'd have a few more patients than usual, but nothing of the kind. In the first place, there was a slump in those parts, a wave of unemployment, which is the worst thing that can happen. And then, in spite of the winter, the weather turned dry and mild, when what the medical profession needs is damp cold. No epidemics either, in short a bad season, a flop. I even saw some of my colleagues making their rounds on foot, which goes to show, smiling as if it amused them to walk, but actually very much put out, their only purpose being to save money by giving their cars a rest. All I had to wear outside was a raincoat. Was that what gave me my obstinate cold? Or could it have been the habit I'd got into of eating much too little. How do I know? Or had my fevers come back? Be that as it may, there was a cold snap just before spring, and after that I never stopped coughing, I was really sick. A disaster. One morning I simply couldn't get up. Bébert's aunt was just passing the house. I got someone to call her. She came up. I sent her to collect a small bill that was still owing to me in the neighborhood. The last and only. I collected half, and it did me for ten days, in bed.

Flat on your back for ten days you have time to think. As soon as I felt better, I'd get out of Rancy, that's what I decided. I hadn't paid my rent for six months … So good-bye my four sticks of furniture! I'd slip quietly away, naturally without a word to anyone, and I'd never be seen again in La Garenne-Rancy. I'd leave without trace or address. When the hyenas of poverty are on your trail, why argue? If you're smart, you'll shut up and clear out. With my M.D., it was true, I could practice anywhere … But anywhere else it would be neither better nor worse … Yes, a little better at first, because it takes a while for people to find out about you, to get into the swing, and pick up the knack of doing you harm. While they're still looking for your most vulnerable spot, you have a little peace, but once they've found your funny bone it's the same all over. All things considered, the best time is the few weeks while you're still unknown in a new place. After that, the crumminess starts all over. It's their nature. The main thing is not to wait till they've spotted your weaknesses. Squash a bedbug before it can slip into its crack. Am I right?

As for sick people, patients, I had no illusions … In another neighborhood they'd be no less grasping or jugheaded or weak-kneed than the ones here. The same wine, the same movies, the same sports talk, the same enthusiastic submission to the natural needs of the gullet and the ass would produce the same crude, filthy horde, staggering from lie to lie, bragging, scheming, vicious … brutal between two fits of panic.

But just as a sick man changes sides in bed and in life, so we too are entitled to move from side to side, it's the only thing we can do, the only defense that's ever been found against Fate. No good hoping to drop off your misery somewhere on the way. Misery is like some horrible woman you've married. Maybe it's better to end up loving her a little than to knock yourself out beating her all your life. Since obviously you won't be able to bump her off. Anyway, I slipped away from my mezzanine pad in Rancy very quietly. At my concierge's they were all sitting around the table over wine and chestnuts when I passed the lodge for the last time. They didn't see a thing. She was scratching herself, and he, bent over the stove, befuddled by the heat, was so far gone in drink that he couldn't keep his eyes open. As far as those people were concerned, I was slipping into the unknown, a kind of endless tunnel. It feels good to have three less people knowing you, that is, spying on you and doing you dirt, three people without the faintest idea what's become of you. It's great. Three, because I'm counting their daughter, their little girl Thérèse, who scratched her fleas and bedbug bites so hard that she was all broken out and festering with boils. It's true that you got so badly bitten at my concierge's that going into their lodge was like crawling into a scrubbing brush.

Falling on the people who passed in the street, the long, naked, whistling finger of gas in the entrance turned them instantly into ghosts, gaunt or stout, framed in the black doorway. The same passers-by would then go and find themselves a bit of color here and there, in the light of windows or street lamps, and finally lose themselves, as black and shapeless as myself, in the night.

I was no longer under any obligation to recognize these passers-by. Still, I'd have liked to stop them for just one second in their aimless roaming, just long enough to tell them once and for all that I was clearing out, getting lost far far away, so far that I didn't give a shit for any of them and they had no way of hurting me now, it was no use trying … When I got to the Boulevard de la Liberté, the vegetable wagons were bumping along the road to Paris. I went the same way. I was almost out of Rancy. It was kind of chilly, so to warm myself I made for Bébert's aunt's lodge, which was a little out of my way. Her lamp was a spot in the darkness at the end of the corridor. "I really have to say good-bye to his aunt," I said to myself. "Then it'll really be over." She was sitting as usual in her chair, among the smells of her lodge. A small stove warmed the room, and there was her old old face that always seemed about to burst into tears now that Bébert was gone. On the wall, over her sewing box, hung a big school photo of Bébert in his school smock, with his beret and his cross. It was an enlargement, she'd paid for it with coffee coupons. I woke her.

She started up. "Good morning, doctor." I still remember her exact words. "You look sick," she said first thing.

“Sit down … I’m not very well myself …”

“I was taking a little walk,” I said, feeling silly to be turning up like that.

“It’s late for a little walk, especially being you’re headed for Place Clichy … There’s a cold wind on the avenue at this time of night …”

She stood up and, stumbling this way and that way, started making us a hot grog, at the same time talking about everything under the sun, but mostly the Henrouilles and Bébert. There was nothing I could do to make her stop talking about Bébert, though it made her miserable and was bad for her and she knew it. I listened without interrupting, I was in a torpor. She wanted to remind me of all Bébert’s endearing qualities, she set them out in a kind of display, taking a great deal of trouble because she was determined not to forget a single one of Bébert’s qualities. She kept starting over, and when she had them all in order and had told me everything that could possibly be told about bottle feeding him as a baby, she’d remember some little quality that would have to be lined up beside the others. She’d start once again from the beginning, and even so she’d forget something, and when that happened she had no recourse but to burst into tears of frustration. She was so tired her mind wandered. She sobbed herself to sleep. She hadn’t strength enough to retrieve her little memories of little Bébert, whom she had loved so dearly, from the darkness for very long. Nothingness was always close to her now and to some extent upon her. A bit of grog and fatigue and there it was, she fell asleep and snored like a distant airplane being carried away by the clouds. She had no one left on earth.

While she sat crumpled among the smells, I thought I’d go away and probably never see Bébert’s aunt again. After all, Bébert had slipped away, quietly and for good, and his old aunt would be following him before long. Her heart was sick and very old. It pumped blood into her arteries as best it could, but then the blood had a hard time climbing back into the veins. She’d be going to the big cemetery nearby, where the crowds of dead are waiting. That’s where she took Bébert to play before his illness. And then it would really be over. They’d come and repaint her lodge, and then it would seem as if we had all retrieved ourselves like Japanese billiard balls on the brink of the hole, shilly-shallying before they end it all.

Billiard balls also start out with vigor and brio, but they never get anywhere in the end. Neither do we, and the whole earth is good for nothing else than to help us all get together. Bébert’s aunt no longer had far to go; there was practically no vigor left in her. We can’t get together while we’re alive. There are too many colors to distract us and too many people moving around us. We can only get together in silence, when it’s too late, like the dead. I knew all that, but it didn’t help. I too had to move and go somewhere else. … I couldn’t stay there with her.

My diploma in my pocket made a big bulge, much bigger than my money and my papers. Outside the police station the patrolman was on duty, waiting to be relieved at midnight. He kept spitting. We bade each other good evening.

After the on-and-off light over the gas pump on the corner of the boulevard came the toll station with its clerks, verdant in their glass cage. The streetcars had stopped running. This was a good time to drop in on the toll clerks and talk about life, which is getting harder and harder, more and more expensive. There were two of them, a young one and an old one, both with dandruff, bent over enormous ledgers. Through their window you could see the fortifications, enormous shadowy piers jutting far out into the night as they waited for ships from so far away, ships so noble that you’ll never see such ships. That’s for sure. But we can hope for them.

I chewed the fat for quite a while with those clerks, we even drank a bit of coffee that was warming on the cast-iron stove. They asked me as a joke if I was going on vacation, at night like that with my little bundle. “That’s right,” I said. No use talking to those clerks about anything too peculiar. They couldn’t have helped me to understand. Still, I was miffed at their little joke and felt the need of saying something striking, of impressing them sort of, so I started talking off the cuff, about the campaign of 1816, the one that had brought the Cossacks to the exact spot where we were then, to the Barrier, on the heels of the great Napoleon.

All this, of course, as nonchalantly as you please. Having convinced those lugs of my superior culture and sprightly erudition, I felt reassured and started down the avenue to the Place Clichy.

You’ve doubtless noticed the two prostitutes waiting at the corner of the Rue des Dames. They fill in the few weary hours separating deep night and early dawn. Thanks to them, life perseveres through the darkness. With their handbags chock-full of prescriptions, allpurpose handkerchiefs, and photos of children in the country, they are the connecting fink. Be careful when approaching them in the darkness, for those women are so specialized?

barely alive enough to respond to the two or three sentences which sum up everything one can do with them

?that they barely exist. They are insect ghosts in buttoned boots. Don't speak to them, don't go too near them. They're dangerous. I had plenty of room. I started running between the car tracks. The avenue is long.

At the end of it you'll see the statue of Marshal Moncey. He has been defending the Place Clichy since 1816 against memories and oblivion, against everything and nothing, with a wreath of not very expensive beads. I came running down the deserted avenue and got there one hundred and twelve years too late. No more Russians, no more battles, no more Cossacks, no more soldiers, nothing except a ledge of the pedestal that you could sit down on, just under the wreath. And the little brazier with three shivering derelicts around it, squinting into the acrid smoke. Not a very good place to be.

A few cars now and then raced desperately for the exits.

In times of crisis you remember the Grands Boulevards as a place that's not as cold as other places. What with my fever, it cost me an effort of the will to make my brain function. Under the influence of Bébert's aunt's grog, I descended the slope in flight from the wind, which isn't quite so cold when it comes at you from behind. Near the Saint-Georges Métro station an old woman in a little round hat was wailing about her granddaughter in the hospital, stricken with meningitis, so she said. With that as an excuse, she was taking up a collection. With me she was out of luck.

All I could give her was words. I told her about little Bébert and also about a little girl I'd taken care of in Paris, who had died of meningitis while I was in medical school. It had taken her three weeks to die, and her mother in the bed next to hers was so unhappy she couldn't sleep, so she masturbated the whole three weeks, and even when it was all over there was no way of stopping her.

Which goes to show that we can't do without our pleasures for so much as a second, and that it's very hard to be really unhappy. Life is like that.

The grieving old woman and I parted outside the Galeries. She was on her way to Les Halles to unload carrots. She'd been plodding the vegetable trail and so had I, the same. But I was drawn to the Tarapout. It's plunked down on the boulevard like a big luminous cake. And people come to it from all directions, in a frantic hurry, like grubs. They emerge from the night with wide-open eyes, all ready to stock up on images. The ecstasy that never ends. It's the same people as in the Métro. But here outside the Tarapout they're happy, same as in New York they scratch their bellies at the box office, secrete a little change, and rush, happy and resolute, into the glaring apertures. There was so much light on the people, on their movements, globes, and garlands of light, that it practically undressed them. You couldn't have talked about anything personal in that lobby, it was the exact opposite of night.

Rather dazed myself, I went to a cafe nearby. At the table next to mine, when I looked up, who should I see but Parapine, my onetime professor, having a beer with his dandruff and all. We get together. There have been big changes in his life. It takes him ten minutes to tell me about them. No laughing matter. Professor Jaunisset had been so mean to him, had so persecuted him that he, Parapine, had been obliged to leave, to resign, and give up his laboratory. And then the mothers of the little girls at the Lycée had waylaid him at the gates of the Institute and beaten him up. Scandal. Investigation. Trouble. At the last moment, thanks to an ambiguous advertisement in a medical journal, he had managed in the nick of time to secure another paltry means of support. Nothing much, of course, but down his alley and not fatiguing. The job was based on an ingenious application of Professor Baryton's recent theories concerning the role of the cinema in the education of cretin children. A significant step forward in the exploration of the unconscious. The latest thing. The talk of the town.

Parapine took his special patients to the Tarapout, because it was so modern. He picked them up at Baryton's rest home in the suburbs, and after the show took them back again?

dazed, glutted with visions, safe, happy, sound, and wonderfully modernized. That was all he had to do. Once they were seated in front of the screen they needed no supervision. A perfect audience. Everybody was happy. The same film ten times in a row would have delighted them. They were without memory. Continuous surprise?what a joy! Their families were delighted. So was Parapine. So was I. We chortled with well-being and drank beer after beer to celebrate the material reinstatement of Parapine in the modern world. We'd stay there, we decided, until two in the morning, until after the last show at the Tarapout, then we'd pick them up and hurry them back to Dr. Baryton's establishment at Vigny-surSeine by cab. A good deal. Delighted to see each other, we started talking just for the pleasure of exchanging fantasies, first about our travels and then about Napoleon, who cropped up in connection with Moncey on the Place Clichy. Everything becomes a pleasure when two people want nothing more than to get on together, because then you finally feel free. You forget your life, that is, you forget all about money.

One thing leading to another, we even thought up some funny things to say about Napoleon. Parapine knew the history of Napoleon well. It had fascinated him in secondary school back in Poland, he told me. Parapine had been properly educated, not like me. So Parapine told me that during the retreat from Russia Napoleon's generals had a hell of a time stopping him from going to Warsaw to get himself sucked off just once more by the Polonaise of his heart. That was Napoleon all over, even in the midst of the worst reverses and calamities. Absolutely irresponsible! Think of his Josephine! He was her eagle, but it made no difference! Ants in his pants, come hell and high water! If you've got a taste for wine and women, nothing can stop you. And we all have it, that's the sad part. That's all we think about! In the cradle, at the cafe, on the throne, in the toilet. Everywhere! Everywhere!

Our peckers! Napoleon or not! Cuckold or not! Pleasure first! To hell, says the Great Defeated One, with those four hundred thousand fanatics, emberesina'd to the gills … as long as old 'Polion gets one last squirt! What a swine! Never mind! Life is like that!

That's how everything ends. In absurdity. Long before the audience, the tyrant is bored with the play he's acting. When he's good and sick of secreting delirium for the benefit of the public, he goes and gets laid. When that happens, he's washed up. Destiny drops him in two seconds flat! His fans have no objection to his massacring them with might and main!

None whatever! That's nothing! They forgive him a hundred percent! What they won't forgive is when he starts boring them all of a sudden. Good work is tolerated only when hammed up! Epidemics stop only when the microbes get disgusted with their toxins. Robespierre was guillotined because he kept saying the same thing, and what did for Napoleon was over two years of Legion-of-Honor inflation. That lunatic's headache was having to supply half of sedentary Europe with a longing for adventure. An impossible job. It killed him.

Whereas the cinema, that new little factotum of our dreams, can be bought, hired for an hour or two like a prostitute.

Nowadays people are so bored that artists have been posted everywhere as a precaution. People are bored even in the houses where artists have been installed, with their overflow of emotion, their sincerities tumbling from floor to floor till the doors rattle. Each one of them is out to throb more outrageously and passionately, to abandon himself more intensely than his neighbor. Nowadays they decorate the crappers and slaughterhouses and pawnshops, and all that to entertain you, to cheer you up, to distract you from your Fate. Just plain living, what a drag! Life is a classroom, and boredom is the monitor, always keeping an eye on you, you have to look busy at all costs, busy with something fascinating, otherwise he comes and corrodes your brain. A day that's nothing more than a lapse of twenty-four hours is intolerable. Like it or not, a day should be one long, almost unbearable pleasure, one long coitus.

Disgusting thoughts of this kind come to you when you're crazed by necessity, when a desire for a thousand other things and places is squeezed into each one of your seconds. Robinson, too, in his way, was harried by the infinite before his accident, but now he was through, or so I thought.

Seeing we were quietly settled at the cafe, I talked, I told Parapine everything that had happened since our last meeting. He understood things, even my kind, and I confessed to him that I had broken my medical career by leaving Rancy so cavalierly. That was the only way to put it. It was no joke. Under the circumstances I couldn't dream of going back to Rancy. Parapine agreed.

While we were talking thus pleasantly, confessing as it were, the Tarapout had an intermission, and all in a heap the movie house musicians came over to the bistrot. So we all had a drink together. Parapine was well known to the musicians.

In the course of the conversation, it came out that a pasha was needed for the stage show. A silent part. The guy who'd played it before had left without notice. Yet it was a good part, and well paid. Not at all strenuous. And in addition, let's not forget, charmingly surrounded by a sumptuous flock of English dancing girls, thousands of precise and agile muscles. Just my line and just what I needed.

I smirked and smiled and waited for the manager to make me an offer. In other words, I applied for the job. Since it was late and they hadn't time to go looking for another actor at the Porte Saint-Martin, the manager was delighted to have me right on the spot. It saved him shoe leather. Me too. He barely looked at me. In fact he took me then and there. And put me to work. It might have bothered them if I'd limped, but even there I'm not so sure …

Penetrating the lovely warm padded basement of the Tarapout, I found a veritable hive of perfumed dressing rooms, where the English girls, while waiting for their number, passed the time romping suggestively and

swearing. Overjoyed to have reconnected with my bread and butter, I hastened to make friends with my easy-going young colleagues. They welcomed me charmingly. Angels. Discreet angels. Besides, it's pleasant to be neither confessed nor despised. That's England for you.

The Tarapout was raking it in. Even backstage all was luxury, well-being, legs, lights, soaps, and sandwiches. I believe the sketch we appeared in was set in Turkestan. It was a pretext for choreographic monkeyshines, musical contortions, and violent drumming. My part was slight but essential. Puffed up with gold and silver, I had some difficulty at first in finding a place to stand in among so many unstable lamps and doodads, but I got used to it, and thus displayed to my best advantage, I had nothing to do but daydream under the opalescent spotlights.

For a good fifteen minutes twenty cockney bayaderes knocked themselves out with song and bacchanalian dance, supposedly to convince me of the reality of their charms. I'd have been satisfied with less. It seemed to me that going through that routine five times a day was a lot to expect of a poor girl. Those girls never weakened, they waggled their bottoms implacably, with the slightly boring energy typical of their race, the unflagging persistence of an ocean liner, plowing its way through endless seas …

21

Why struggle, waiting is good enough, since everything is bound to end up in the street. Basically, only the street counts. Why deny it? It's waiting for us. One of these days we'll have to make up our minds and go down into the street, not one or two or three of us, but all. We stand on the brink, we simper and fuss, but never mind, the time will come. Interiors are no good. As soon as a door closes on a man, he begins to smell and everything he has on him smells too. Body and soul, he deteriorates. He rots. It serves us right if people stink. We should have looked after them. We should have taken them out, evicted them, exposed them to the air. All things that stink are indoors, they preen themselves, but they stink all the same.

Speaking of families, I know a pharmacist on the Avenue de Saint-Ouen who had a marvelous sign in his window, a lovely advertisement: One bottle (price three francs) will purge the whole family. Isn't that great! They all belch! … and shit together, familywise. They hate one another's guts, the essence of home life, but no one complains because after all it's cheaper than living in a hotel.

Which brings us to hotels. A hotel is more unsettled, less pretentious than an apartment, you don't feel so guilty. The human race is never free from worry, and since the last judgment will take place in the street, it's obvious that in a hotel you won't have so far to go. Let the trumpeting angels come, we hotel dwellers will be the first to get there. In a hotel you try not to attract too much notice. It doesn't do a bit of good. As soon as you shout too loud or too often, they put their finger on you. Pretty soon, the way sound carries from room to room, you'll almost be afraid to piss in the washbasin. So naturally you improve your manners, the way officers do in the navy. Heaven and earth can start quaking from one minute to the next, we'll be prepared, it won't faze us, for already, just colliding in the hotel corridors, we beg and obtain pardon ten times a day.

I'd advise you to familiarize yourself with the toilet smell of everyone on your floor; it comes in handy. It's hard to harbor illusions at a rooms-by-the-month hotel. The guests don't cut much of a figure. They journey discreetly through life from day to day, the hotel is a ship that's rotting and full of holes, and they know it.

The one I moved to was patronized mostly by students from the provinces. As soon as you set foot on the stairs, it smelled of breakfast and old cigarette butts. At night you could recognize the place from a distance, because of the flame of gray light over the door and the gap-toothed gilt letters hanging from the balcony like an enormous dental plate. A monstrous lodging machine, distempered by sordid goings-on.

We'd pay one another visits from room to room. After years of crummy undertakings in the world of practical affairs, of so-called adventures, I was back again with students. Their desires were still the same, intense and putrid, neither more nor less insipid than in the old days when I'd left them. The people had changed, but the ideas were the same. They still went at more or less regular hours to the other end of the neighborhood to nibble bits of medicine, odds and ends of chemistry, a pill or two of law, and heaps of zoology. The war, in passing over their age group, hadn't changed a thing, and if out of sympathy you took an interest in their dreams, they led you straight to their fortieth birthday. These young men gave themselves twenty years, two hundred and forty months of dogged thrift, in which to achieve happiness.

Their notions of happiness and success were conventional images, but carefully drawn. They saw themselves at the last square, surrounded by a small but incomparably precious family. Yet they would seldom have looked at this family. What for? One thing a family isn't meant for is to be looked at. And a father's distinction and happiness consist in kissing his family ?his poetry?without ever looking at it.

By way of novelty, they'd have motored to Nice with their dowered bride and possibly have adopted the use of checks for making payments. As for the shameful reaches of the soul, they would no doubt have taken their wife to a whorehouse one evening. No more. The rest of their world would be shut up in their daily papers and guarded by the police. Staying at that flea-bitten hotel made my friends a trifle shameful and irritable for the moment. The young bourgeois student feels that he's being punished, and since it's taken for granted that he can't start saving yet, he drowns his sorrow in Bohemia and more Bohemia, in coffee-house despair.

At the beginning of each month we went through a short but acute fit of eroticism, the whole hotel shook with it. We washed our feet. An erotic expedition was arranged. Money orders arrived from the provinces, and that is what made up our minds. I might have obtained just as good coituses from my English chorus girls at the Tarapout, and free of charge at that, but thinking it over, I rejected the easy way because of the complications and the rotten jealous little pimps who were always hanging around backstage, waiting for the girls.

Since we read several pornographic magazines at our hotel, we knew the ropes and addresses needed for getting fucked in Paris. You have to admit that addresses are fun. You let yourself be tempted … even I, who had known the Passage des Bérésinas and traveled and experienced no end of complications in the

pornographic line, never seem to have exhausted the hope of intimate revelations. Where the ass is concerned, there's always a residue of curiosity. You say to yourself that the ass has nothing more to tell you, that you haven't one more minute to waste on it, and then you start in again just to make absolutely sure that the subject is exhausted, you learn something new about it after all, and that suffices to launch you on a wave of optimism.

You pull yourself together, you think more clearly than before, you start hoping again even if you'd given up hope altogether, and inevitably you revert once more to the ass, the same old story. Indeed, there are always, at all ages, discoveries to be made in the vagina. So one afternoon three of us from the hotel set out in search of an inexpensive piece. It was quick work, thanks to the connections of Pomone, who operated an agency in the Batignolles quarter for every kind of erotic arrangement or combination that anyone could desire. His books were full of offers at all prices. This providential man officiated without ostentation of any kind at the back of a court; his exiguous premises were so poorly lit that you needed as much tactile sense and gift of dead reckoning to find your way as in an unfamiliar urinal. Your nerves would be unsettled by the layers of curtain you had to part before reaching the procurer, who was always to be found seated in an artificial confessional twilight. Because of that dim light, to tell the truth, I never really managed to get a good look at Pomone, and though we had long conversations and even worked together for a time, though he made me all sorts of propositions and confided any number of sensitive secrets, I should be quite incapable of recognizing him today if I met him in hell. I remember only that the furtive enthusiasts in the sitting room, waiting their turn for an interview, always behaved correctly, never any familiarity between them, in fact they were as reserved as if they'd been waiting for some eccentric dentist who disliked noise and didn't care much for light either.

I made the acquaintance of Pomone through a medical student. The student cultivated him as a means of making a bit of extra money out of his cock, because, you see, the lucky bastard was gifted with a monumental penis. He and his amazing equipment would be hired to bring animation into little intimate gatherings in the suburbs. The ladies made a great fuss over him. especially those who wouldn't have believed that anyone could have "such a big one." Overwhelmed young girls would dream and rave. In the police records our student figured under the alarming pseudonym of Belshazzar!

The watting customers seldom strike up a conversation. Suffering exhibits itself; pleasure and the needs of the flesh hang their heads in shame.

Say what you please, it's a sin to be a lecher and poor. When Pomone heard about my situation and my medical past, nothing could stop him from telling me about his suffering. A vice was wearing him out. It consisted in "touching" himself continuously under his desk, while conversing with his customers, hunters afflicted with an itching perineum. "It's my work, you see! How do you expect me to control myself … with all the horrors they tell me, the swine! …" In short, his customers tempted him to vice, like those obese butchers who can't help gorging themselves on meat. In addition, I believe his bowels were constantly inflamed as a result of a malignant fever originating in his lungs. And the fact is that he was carried off fay tuberculosis a few years later. He was also exhausted in a different sense by the chatter of his pretentious lady customers, always cheating, always making up ridiculous stories about nothing or about their sexual apparatus, the like of which, to hear them talk, you wouldn't find if you ransacked all four corners of the earth. What the men wanted most and what had to be found for them was mostly consenting and admiring partners for their erotic wrinkles. Incredible the quantities of love those men had to share, as much as Madame Herote's customers. A single morning's mail would bring the Pomone Agency enough unsatisfied love to extinguish all the wars in the world forever. But these deluges of sentiment never went beyond the ass. The more's the pity. His desk disappeared beneath that mass of passionate banalities. In my desire to know more, I decided to help him for a while in classifying that vast epistolary ragout. Just as with neckties or diseases, he explained, you grouped them according to types, the lunatics on one side, the masochists and sadists on another, the flagellants over here, the ones looking for a "governess" on a different page, and so on. It's not long before your amusement becomes a chore. We've been expelled from Paradise all right! No doubt about that! Pomone was of the same opinion with his moist hands and his everlasting vice, which gave him pleasure and remorse at the same time. After a few months I knew enough about his business and himself. My visits became less frequent.

At the Tarapout they continued to regard me as quite acceptable, a quiet, punctual super, but after a few weeks of calm, my customary ill luck sought me out from an unusual quarter, and I was obliged to abandon my work as a super and resume my miserable journey. Seen in perspective, those days at the Tarapout were only a sort of forbidden and insidious port of call. Admittedly, I was always well dressed during those four months, once as a prince, twice as a centurion, one day as an aviator, and well and regularly paid. At the Tarapout I ate enough to last me for years. I led the life of a coupon clipper without the coupons. Treachery! Disaster! One night, I don't know why, they changed our number. The scene of the new sketch was the

London Embankment. My misgivings were immediate, our little English girls were expected to sing, off key and ostensibly on the banks of the Thames at night, while I played the part of a policeman. A totally silent role, walking up and down in front of the parapet. Suddenly, when I'd stopped thinking about it, their singing grew louder than life itself and steered fate in the direction of calamity. While they were singing, I couldn't think of anything but all the poor world's misery and my own, those tarts with their singing made my heart burn like tuna fish. I thought I'd digested it, forgotten the worst! But this was the worst of all, a song that couldn't make it … And as they sang, they wiggle-waggled, to try and bring it off. A fine mess, all of a sudden we were knee deep in misery … No mistake! Mooning about in the fog! Their lament was dripping with misery, it made me grow older from minute to minute. Panic oozed from the very stage set. And nothing could stop them. They didn't seem to understand all the harm their song was doing us all … They laughed and flung out their legs in perfect time, while lamenting their whole life … When it comes to you from so far, with such sureness of aim, you can't mistake it and you can't resist.

Misery was everywhere, in spite of the luxurious hall; it was on us, on the set, it overflowed, it drenched the whole earth. Those girls were real artists … Abject misery poured out of them, and they made no attempt to stop it or even understand it. Only their eyes were sad. The eyes aren't enough. They sang the calamity of existence, and they didn't understand. They mistook it for love, nothing but love, the poor little things had never been taught anything else. Supposedly, they were singing about some little setback in love. That's what they thought! When you're young and you don't know, you mistake everything for love trouble …

Where I go … where I look …

It's only for you … ou …

Only for you … ou …

That's what they sang.

It's a mania with the young to put all humanity into one ass, just one, the dream of dreams, mad love. Maybe later they would find out where all that ended, when their rosiness had fled, when the no-nonsense misery of their lousy country had engulfed them, all sixteen of them, with their hefty mare's thighs and their bobbing tits … The truth is that misery already had the darlings by the neck, by the waist, they couldn't escape. By the belly, by the breath, by every cord of their thin, off-key voices.

Misery was inside them. No costume, no spangles, no lights, no smile could fool her, delude her about her own, misery finds her own wherever they may hide; it just amuses her to let them sing silly songs of hope while waiting their turn … Those things awaken misery, caress and arouse her …

That's what our unhappiness, our terrible unhappiness comes to, an amusement. So to hell with people who sing love songs! Love itself is misery and nothing else, misery lying out of our mouths, the bitch, and nothing else. She's everywhere, don't wake her, not even in pretense. She never pretends. And yet those English girls went through their routine three times a day, with their backdrop and accordion tunes. It was bound to end badly.

I didn't interfere, but don't worry, I saw the catastrophe coming.

First one of the girls fell sick. Death to cuties who stir up calamity! Let 'em croak, we'll all be better off! And while we're at it, don't hang around street corners near accordion players, as often as not that's where you'll catch it, where the truth will strike. A Polish girl was hired to take the place of the sick one in their act. The Polish chick coughed too, when she wasn't doing anything else. She was tall and pale, powerfully built. We made friends right away. In two hours I knew all about her soul, as far as her body was concerned, I had to wait a while. This girl's mania was mutilating her nervous system with impossible crushes. Naturally, what with her own unhappiness, she slid into the English girls' lousy song like a knife into butter. Their song began very nicely, like all popular songs it didn't seem to mean a thing, and then your heart began to droop, it made you so sad that listening to it you lost all desire to live, because it's true that everything, youth and all that, comes to nothing, and then you started harking to the words, even after the song was over and the tune had gone home to sleep in its own bed, its honest-to-goodness bed, the tomb where everything ends. Two choruses, and you felt a kind of longing for the sweet land of death, the land of everlasting tenderness and immediate foggy forgetfulness. As a matter of fact their voices were foggy too.

All of us in chorus repeated their plaint, reproachful of everybody who was still around, still dragging their living carcasses from place to place, waiting along the riverbanks, on all the riverbanks of the world, for life to finish passing, and in the meantime doing one thing and another, selling things to other ghosts, oranges and racing tips and counterfeit coins … policemen, sex fiends, sorrows, telling each other things in this patient fog

that will never end …

Tania was the name of my new pal from Poland. Her life at the moment, I gathered, was one compact frenzy, because of a little forty-year-old bank clerk, whom she had known since Berlin. She wanted to go back to Berlin and love him in spite of everything and at all costs. She'd have done anything to get back to him.

She pursued theatrical agents, those promisers of engagements, to the ends of their pissy stairways. While waiting for answers that never came, those rotters pinched her buttocks. But she was so totally enthralled by her faraway love that she hardly noticed their manipulations. This state of affairs hadn't prevailed for a week when disaster struck. For months she had been loading Destiny with temptations, like a cannon. Flu carried off her marvelous lover. The news came to us one Saturday afternoon. Disheveled and haggard, she dragged me to the Gare du Nord. That in itself was nothing unusual, but in her frenzy she clamored at the ticket window, insisting that she had to be in Berlin in time for the funeral. It took two station-masters to dissuade her, to get her to understand that it was much too late.

In the state she was in, I couldn't think of leaving her. She was intent on her tragedy, and still more intent on exhibiting it to me in full flood. What an opportunity! Love thwarted by poverty and distance is like a sailor's love; no two ways, it's irrefutable and sure fire. In the first place, when you're unable to meet too often, you can't fight, which is that much gained. Since life consists of madness spiked with lies, the farther you are from each other the more lies you can put into it and the happier you'll be. That's only natural and normal. Truth is inedible.

Nowadays, for instance, it's easy to talk about Jesus Christ. Did Jesus Christ go to the toilet in front of everybody? It seems to me his racket wouldn't have lasted very long if he'd taken a shit in public. Very little presence, that's the whole trick, especially in love. Once Tania had been thoroughly assured that there was no possible train to Berlin, we made up for it in telegrams. At the Bourse post office, we composed an extremely long one, because we didn't know whom to address it to. We didn't know anybody in Berlin except the dead man. From that moment on, there was nothing we could do but exchange words about the dead man's death. Words helped us to walk around the Bourse two or three times. Then we had to do something to soothe Tania's sorrow, so we strolled slowly up toward Montmartre, garbling words of grief.

On the Rue Lepic you start meeting people on their way to the top of the city in search of merriment. They're in a hurry. When they get to Sacré-Coeur, they look down at the night, a big dense hollow with houses piled at the bottom,

On the little square we went into the cafe that looked the least expensive. By way of consolation and gratitude Tania let me kiss her wherever I pleased. She also liked to drink. Tipsy merrymakers were already asleep on the benches around us. The clock at the top of the little church started striking the hours and more hours, and on and on. We had reached the end of the world, that was becoming obvious. We couldn't go any further, because further on there were only dead people.

The dead began on the Place du Tertre, two steps away. From where we were it was easy to see them. They were passing over the Galeries Duf ayel, to the east of us. Even so, you've got to know how to find them? namely, from inside with your eyes almost closed, because the electric signs with their great copses of light make it very hard to see the dead, even through the clouds. I realized at once that these dead had Bébert with them. Bébert and I even gave each other the high sign, and then not far from him I saw the pale girl from Rancy, she had finally finished aborting, this time her guts had been taken out of her, and we, too, signaled to each other.

There were old patients of mine here and there, male and female, that I'd long stopped thinking about, and still others, the black man in a white cloud, all alone, the one they had given one lash too many down there in Topo, and old man Grappa, the lieutenant of the virgin forest! I'd thought of them all from time to time, of the lieutenant, the tortured black, and also of my Spaniard, the priest, he had come down from heaven that night with the dead to say prayers, and his golden crucifix was getting in his way, making it hard for him to fly from sky to sky. It got tangled up in the clouds, the dirtiest and yellowest of them, and as time went on I recognized more dead people, more and more … So many you can't help feeling ashamed of not having had time to look at them while they were living here beside you, all those years …

There's never enough time, it's true, not even for thinking of yourself. Well, anyway, all those sons of bitches had turned into angels without my noticing! Whole clouds full of angels, including some very far-out and disreputable ones, all over the place. Roaming around, high over the city! I looked for Molly among them, a golden opportunity, my sweet, my only friend, but she hadn't come with them … She'd always been so nice that she probably had a little heaven all to herself, right next to God … I was glad not to find her with all those thugs, oh yes, the ghosts assembled over the city that night were really just the dregs of the dead, just

scoundrels, scum and riffraff. Especially from the cemetery nearby they came, more and more of them, though it's not a big cemetery, not at all high class. There were even Communards, all drenched with blood, with their mouths wide open as if they wanted to yell some more and couldn't … The Communards were waiting with the others, waiting for La Pérouse, La Pérouse of the Islands, who was in command of the whole rally that night … La Pérouse was taking a hell of a long time to get ready, because of his wooden leg, which he'd put on backward … he'd always had trouble with that wooden leg, and besides he couldn't find his big spyglass.

He refused to come out of the clouds without his spyglass around his neck, crazy idea, the famous spyglass of his adventures, a laugh, it made you see people and things far away, further and further away through the small end, and naturally becoming more and more desirable because and in spite of your getting closer to them. Some Cossacks, who were tucked away not far from the Moulin, couldn't manage to get clear of their graves. They were trying so hard it was terrifying, but they had tried many times before … They kept toppling back into their graves, they'd been drunk since 1820.

Nevertheless, a shower made them shoot up, and there they were over the city, refreshed. Then they scattered far and wide and painted the night with their turbulence, from cloud to cloud … The Opera in particular seemed to attract them, with its enormous brazier of electric signs in the middle. Spurting from it, the ghosts bounded to the other end of the sky, so numerous and so active they made your head spin. Ready at last, La Pérouse wanted them to hoist him up at the last stroke of four. They held him in place and strapped him to the saddle. Finally astride and settled, he went right on waving his arms and gesticulating. The clock striking four almost made La Pérouse lose his balance as he was buttoning his coat. But then he led the mad rush across the sky. A hideous rout. Twisting and turning, the phantoms pour from all directions, the ghosts of a thousand heroic battles … They pursue, they challenge, they charge one another, centuries against centuries. For a long while, the north is cluttered with their abominable męlée. The bluish horizon detaches itself, at last the day rises through the big rent they've made in the night while escaping.

After that it becomes very hard to find them. You have to get outside of Time. If you do manage to find them, it will be over toward England, but on that side the fog is always so dense, so compact that it's like sails rising one after another from the earth to the highest heaven and for all time. With practice and close attention you can find them even so, but never for very long, because of the wind that keeps blowing rain squalls and mists from the open sea.

The tall woman who is there, guarding the island, is the last of all. Her head is even higher than the uppermost mists. By now she is the only halfway living thing on the island. Her red hair, high over everything else, still puts a little gold into the clouds; that's all there is left of the sun.

They say she's trying to make herself a cup of tea.

She may as well try, because she'll be there for all eternity. She'll never bring her tea to a boil because of the fog, which has become too dense and penetrating. For a teapot she uses the hull of a ship, the most beautiful, the largest of ships, the last she could find in Southampton, and she heats up her tea in it, waves and waves of it … She stirs … She stirs it about with an enormous oar … That keeps her busy.

Serious for all time, bent over her tea, she doesn't look at anything else. The whole dance has passed over her, but she hasn't even moved, she's used to having these ghosts from the Continent losing themselves over there … That's the end of it. With her fingers she stirs, that's good enough for her, the coals under the ashes between two dead forests.

She tries to revive the fire, it's all hers now, but her tea will never boil again. There's no life left for the flames.

No more life in the world for anyone, only a wee bit for her … everything is almost over …

22

Tania woke me up in the room where we had finally gone to bed. It was ten in the morning. To get rid of her I told her I wasn't feeling very well and wanted to stay in bed a while. Life was starting in again. She pretended to believe me. So soon as she'd gone, I went out myself. There really was something I wanted to do. The saraband of the night before had left me with a strong taste of remorse. The memory of Robinson came back to plague me. It was true that I'd abandoned the man to his fate and worse, to the mercies of Abbé Protiste. No need to say more. True, I'd heard that everything was just fine down there in Toulouse and that Grandma Henrouille was being good and kind to him now. In certain situations, however, you only hear what you want to hear and what seems most convenient … Come right down to it, those vague rumors didn't prove a thing.

Anxious and curious, I headed for Rancy in quest of news, something definite, the real thing. To get there I had to take the Rue des Batignolles, where Pomone lived. It was on my way. As I approached his house, I was surprised to see Pomone in person on the corner, apparently shadowing a little man at some distance. Since Pomone never went out, I figured something big must be going on. I recognized the character he was following, a client, in his correspondence he referred to himself as "the Cid." But we had been tipped oft", "the Cid" worked in the post office.

For years he'd been pestering Pomone to find him a well-bred chick, that was his dream. But the young ladies that were introduced to him were never well bred enough to suit him. They committed gaffes, so he claimed. On close consideration, there are two main classes of chick, the "broad-minded" ones and the ones who've had "a good Catholic upbringing." Two equally crummy ways of feeling superior, two ways of titillating anxious, frustrated men, the "shrinking violet" type and the girl about town.

This search had gone on month after month and engulfed all "the Cid's" savings. His transactions with Pomone had brought him to the end of his resources and the end of his hopes. Later on I heard that "the Cid" had committed suicide in a vacant lot that same afternoon. Actually, I knew something cockeyed was afoot the moment I saw Pomone leave his house. So I followed them quite a way through that neighborhood, which loses its shops as it goes along, and even its colors one after another, till there's nothing left but ramshackle bistrots as you approach the toll gate. When you're not in a hurry, it's easy to get lost in those streets, befogged by the sadness and utter indifference of the place. So great is your ennui that if you had a little money you'd jump into a cab and escape. The people you pass are burdened with a fate so heavy that you feel embarrassed on their account. It's practically certain that behind their curtained windows some of those small pensioners have left their gas on. Nothing you can do about it. "Christ!" you say. Which isn't much.

There's not even a bench to sit down on. Everywhere you look it's brown and green. When it rains, it rains from all directions, from the front and sides, and the street is as slippery as the back of a big fish with a parting of rain in the middle. You can't even speak of disorder in that neighborhood, it's more like an almost well-kept prison, a prison that has no need of doors.

Roaming around like that, I finally lost Pomone and his suicide, right after the Rue des Vinaigriers. That put me so near La Garenne-Rancy I couldn't resist the temptation to cast a glance across the fortifications.

From a distance, La Garenne-Rancy doesn't look bad, you can't deny it, because of the trees in the big cemetery. You could swear you were in the Bois de Boulogne. When you really want information about someone, you have to go to the people who know. After all, I said to myself, what have I got to lose by paying the Henrouilles a little visit?

They must know what's going on in Toulouse. So then I made a mistake. You can never be careful enough. Before you know it, you're deep in the noisome regions of the night. It doesn't take long for disaster to strike. The merest trifle can bring it on, and besides, in the first place, there are certain people you shouldn't dream of going back to see. Especially those people! Once it's done, you're sunk.

Roaming at random, I was finally drawn by habit to the vicinity of the Henrouilles' house. Still in the same place, I couldn't get over it. Suddenly the rain was coming down. There was no one in the street but me. I didn't dare go any closer. I was about to turn back when the door of the house opened just enough for the daughter-in-law to motion me to come in. That woman saw everything. She'd seen me on the opposite sidewalk, looking fuddled. I had lost all desire to go closer, but she insisted. She even called me by my name.

"Doctor! … Oh, hurry!"

That's how she called me, not a moment's hesitation … I was afraid of attracting attention, so I hurried up her front steps. Again I saw the little corridor with the stove in it, the whole layout. I have to admit, it gave me

the same old uneasy feeling. Then she started telling me that her husband had been very sick for two months and was getting steadily worse. Naturally I had my suspicions.

“What about Robinson?” I hastened to ask her.

At first she eluded my question. Then finally she decided to answer. “They’re both fine … Their business in Toulouse is doing well,” she finally said, but talking very fast. That was all, then she shifted back to her sick husband. She wanted me to see him that minute, there was no time to lose … seeing that I was so devoted … that I knew her husband well … that he had confidence in no one but me … that he’d refused to see any other doctor … that they didn’t have my address … Bullshit, in short.

I had good reason to suspect that there was more to her husband’s illness than met the eye. I knew the lady well and the ways of the household. Nevertheless, my idiotic curiosity made me climb the stairs to the bedroom.

He was lying in the same bed where I’d treated Robinson after his accident some months before.

A room changes in a few months, even if you don’t move anything. Old and rundown as things may be, they still find the strength, the Lord knows where, to get older. Everything had changed around us. Not that anything had moved, no, of course not, the things themselves had actually changed, in depth. Things are different when you go back to them, they seem to have more power to enter into us more sadly, more deeply, more gently than before, to merge with the death which is slowly, pleasantly, sneakily growing inside us, and which we train ourselves to resist a little less each day. From moment to moment, we see life languishing, shriveling inside us, and with it the things and people who may have been commonplace or precious or imposing when we last left them. Fear of the end has marked all that with its wrinkles, while we were chasing around town in search of pleasure or bread.

Soon our past will be attended only by inoffensive, pathetic, disarmed things and people, mistakes with nothing to say for themselves.

The wife left me alone with her husband. He was in bad shape. Not much circulation left. The trouble was in his heart.

“I’m going to die,” he said simply.

Cases like this were my special form of luck. I listened to his heartbeat just to be doing something, the few gestures people expect under those circumstances. His heart was racing, no doubt about it; shut up behind his ribs, it ran after life in fits and starts, but run or not, it would never catch up with life. His goose was cooked. Soon, the way it was stumbling, his heart would fall in the muck, all juicy and red, gushing like a crushed pomegranate. That’s how his flabby old heart would look on the marble, cut open with a knife at the autopsy that would take place in a few days. All this would end in a lovely court-ordered autopsy. That’s what I foresaw, considering that everyone in the neighborhood would be relaying some highly seasoned rumors after his death, which would look very fishy after the other business.

The neighbors were laying for his wife with all the accumulated and still undigested suspicions aroused by the previous affair. This would come up a little later. At the moment the husband didn’t know how to live or die. He was already part way out of life, but he couldn’t quite get rid of his lungs. He expelled air, and air came back. He’d have been glad to let himself die, but he had to live to the end. It was rough work, and it was driving him up the wall.

“I can’t feel my feet anymore!” he groaned … “I’m cold up to my knees …” He tried to touch his feet, but he couldn’t.

He couldn’t drink either. It was almost over. Handing him the tisane his wife had made him, I wondered what she could have put in it. That tisane didn’t smell very good, but smell proves nothing. Valerian smells vile all by itself. And the way he was suffocating, it didn’t make much difference whether the tisane was spiked or not. Still, he was going to a lot of trouble, working like mad with all the muscles he had left under his skin to keep suffering and breathing. He was struggling as much against life as against death. In a case like that the right thing would be to burst. When nature stops giving a damn, there wouldn’t seem to be any limits. Behind the door his wife was listening to our consultation, but I knew his wife like a book. I tiptoed over and caught her. “Caughtcha!” I said. She wasn’t the least bit put out, she even whispered something in my ear.

“You should get him to remove his plate,” she murmured … “It must interfere with his breathing …” It was all right with me. Why indeed shouldn’t he remove his plate?

“But you tell him,” I advised her. It was ticklish saying a thing like that to someone in his condition.

“No! No! It would be better coming from you,” she insisted. “Coming from me it would upset him to know I knew …”

“Really?” I asked in amazement. “Why?”

“He’s been wearing it for thirty years and never said a word about it to me …”

“In that case,” I suggested, “why not let him keep it? As long as he’s used to breathing with it in …”

“Oh no, I’d never forgive myself,” she replied with a kind of quaver in her voice … I went quietly back into the room. He heard me approaching. He was glad I’d come back. Between fits of suffocation he spoke to me. He made an effort to be friendly, asked how I was getting along, if I had built up a new clientele … “Oh, yes!” I said in reply to all his questions. It would have been much too long and complicated to go into detail. Not the right time. Hidden behind the door, his wife made signs at me, meaning I should ask him to remove his plate. I went close to his ear and whispered, advising him to remove it. Mistake!

“I threw it down the toilet!” he said, his eyes more frightened than ever. Vanity, that’s what it was. After that he let out a long rale.

An artist makes do with what happens to be at hand. All his life Henrouille had taken aesthetic pains with his dental plate.

That was a good time for confessions. I’d have liked him to take advantage and give me his opinion about his mother and what had been done to her. But he couldn’t. His mind was wandering. He began to drool copiously. The end. Impossible to get another sentence out of him. I wiped his lips and went back downstairs. His wife in the corridor wasn’t at all pleased, she almost lit into me about the plate, as if it were my fault.

“It was gold, doctor! … I know! I know how much he paid for it! … They don’t make them like that anymore!” … She went on and on! She made me so nervous I offered to go up and try again. But only if she went with me.

That time the husband hardly recognized us. Just a little. The rales weren’t as loud when we were both with him; it was as if he wanted to hear everything his wife and I said to each other.

I didn’t go to the funeral. The autopsy that I had kind of feared never came off. It was all done on the quiet. But after that the widow Henrouille and I were on the outs for good because of the dental plate.

Young people are always in such a hurry to go and make love, in such a rush to grab hold of anything that’s been advertised as a pleasure. When it comes to sensation they never think twice. It’s a little like those travelers who go and eat anything that’s given them at the station buffet while waiting for the whistle to blow. As long as you provide young people with the two or three phrases likely to steer a conversation in the direction of fucking, that’s all they need, they’ll be as happy as larks. Happiness comes easy to the young, why wouldn’t it when they come as often as they please?

Youth is a glorious beach at the edge of the water, where women seem at last to be freely available, where they’re so beautiful they don’t need the falsehood of our dreams. So naturally when winter comes it’s hard for us to go home, to tell ourselves that it’s all over, to admit it. We’d be glad to stay on, even in the cold of age … we go on hoping. That’s not hard to understand. We’re contemptible. No one’s to blame. Pleasure and happiness come first. I think so too. When you start hiding from people, it’s a sign that you’re afraid to play with them. That in itself is a disease. We should try to find out why we refuse to get cured of loneliness. A character I met in the hopsital during the war, a corporal, spoke to me about that kind of feelings. Too bad I never saw him again! “The earth is dead,” he said to me. “We people are just worms on top of it, worms on its fat, revolting carcass, eating its entrails and all its poisons … Nothing can help us, we were born rotten … There you have it!”

True, they hauled this thinker off to the fortress one night, proof that he was still good enough to be shot. I even remember that it took two M.P.‘s to hold him, a tall one and a short one. At the court-martial they said he was an anarchist.

Sometimes, when you think about it years later, you wish you could retrieve the words certain people said and the people themselves, so as to ask them what they were trying to tell you … But they’re as gone as gone can be! …We weren’t educated enough to understand them … We’d like to know if maybe they’ve changed their minds … But it’s much too late … It’s over and done! … Nobody knows anything about them anymore.

So we just have to go on alone in the night. We've lost our true companions, and we didn't even ask them the right question, the real one, when there was still time. When we were with them, we didn't know. Lost men. Anyway, we're always late. Vain regrets won't make the kettle boil.

Well, luckily at least Abbé Protiste came to see me one fine morning to split the commission we'd made on Grandma Henrouille's crypt. Actually I'd given up expecting that priest. He dropped like a gift from heaven … We each had fifteen hundred francs coming to us. At the same time he brought me good news of Robinson. It seems his eyes were a good deal better. The lids had even stopped suppurating. And they were all asking for me down there. True enough, I'd promised to go and see them. Even Protiste insisted. From what he told me I also gathered that Robinson was going to be married soon to the daughter of the woman who sold candles in the church next to the burial vault, the one that had jurisdiction over Grandma Henrouille's mummies. The thing was as good as done. Naturally all this started us talking about the death of Monsieur Henrouille, but we didn't go into it very deeply. More pleasantly, the conversation came back to Robinson's future, and then to the city of Toulouse, that I didn't know at all and that Grappa had talked about in the old days, and then to the weird business the two of them were engaged in down there, and finally to the young girl who was due to marry Robinson. In other words, we talked about everything under the sun, a little of this and a little of that … Fifteen hundred francs! That made me indulgent, and optimistic, so to speak. Everything he told me about Robinson's plans struck me as wise, sensible, judicious, and well suited to the circumstances . . ?

Everything would be all right. So at least I thought. And then the priest and I started talking about age. We had both spent more than thirty years on inhospitable and little regretted shores. There was no point in even turning around to look back on those shores. We hadn't lost much by growing older. "A man, after all, must be very degraded," I concluded, "to regret one year more than another! … You and I, Mr. Priest, can grow old with gusto!

And enthusiasm! Was yesterday such a bargain? Or last year? … What did you think of it? … Regret what? … I ask you! … Youth? … You and I never had any youth!

"The poor, it's true, get younger inside as they go along, and toward the end, provided that on the way they've made some attempt to jettison all the lies and fear and contemptible eagerness to obey they were given at birth, they're less revolting than at the start. The rest of what exists on earth isn't for them! It doesn't concern them. Their job, their only job, is to get rid of their obedience, to vomit it up. If they manage that before kicking in, then they can boast that they haven't lived for nothing."

I was definitely in good form … Those fifteen hundred francs had sparked me off. I went on: "The only real youth, Mr. Priest, is loving everyone without distinction, that alone is true, that alone is young and new. Well, Mr. Priest, do you know many young people who are like that? … I don't! … All I see is crusty old stupidities fermenting in more or less recent bodies, and the more these sordid absurdities ferment the more they stimulate the young and the more they boast how fantastically young they are! But it's not true, it's bullshit … They're young the way a boil is young, no more, because of the pus inside that hurts and makes them swell up."

My talking to him like that upset Protiste, and not wanting to irritate him anymore, I changed the subject … For one thing, he'd been very kind to me, providentially so in fact … It's hard to stop yourself from going back to a subject that's as much on your mind as that was on mine. It scrambles your brains. To get free, you try to unload some part of it on everybody who comes to see you, and that exasperates them. Being alone is to train for death. "A man," I went on, "should die more abundantly than a dog and take a thousand minutes to do it. Each minute will be new all the same and laced with enough fear and trembling to make him forget all the pleasure he may have had in making love during the preceding thousand years … Happiness on earth would be to die with and while having pleasure … The rest is nothing at all, a fear that we don't dare avow, art." Hearing me rave that way, Protiste thought I must have fallen sick again. Maybe he was right and maybe I was wrong about everything. In my isolation, searching for a way to punish man's universal egoism, it's true that I was jerking off my imagination, looking for punishment everywhere, even in death. You amuse yourself as best you can when you're short of friends and don't often get a chance to go out, much less to emerge from yourself and fuck.

I admit it wasn't exactly sensible to needle Protiste with philosophical ideas contrary to his religious convictions. But the fact is his whole person exuded a nasty little smell of superiority that must have got on quite a few people's nerves. As he saw it, all we humans on earth were in a kind of waiting-for-eternity room, each with a number. His number, I don't have to tell you, was first class, good for Paradise. He didn't give a shit about anything else.

Such convictions are unbearable. On the other hand, when he offered that same afternoon to advance me the price of the trip to Toulouse, I stopped needling and contradicting him. My dread of having to face Tania and

her ghost again at the Tarapout made me accept his invitation without a word of argument. A week or two of the easy life, if nothing else, that's what I said to myself. When it comes to tempting you, the Devil has millions of tricks. We'll never know them all. If we lived long enough, we wouldn't know where to go to start a new happiness. We'd have strewn aborted happinesses all over, the whole earth would stink of them, unbreathably. The ones in the museums, the real abortions, turn some people's stomachs, the mere sight of the things makes them want to vomit. And our loathsome attempts to be happy are miscarried enough to sicken you long before you die for real.

If we didn't forget them, we'd simply waste away. Not to mention the trouble we've taken to get where we are, to make our hopes, our degenerate joys, our passions and lies interesting … Want some? Help yourself. And what of our money? And our little affectations that go with it … And the things we get other people to swear to and that we ourselves swear to, things we thought no one had ever said or sworn to before, before they filled our minds and mouths, and perfumes and caresses and mimicries, in short, everything it takes to hide all that as much as possible, so we'll never have to speak of it again, for fear it will come back at us like vomit. Our trouble isn't lack of perseverance, it's that we're not on the right road that leads to an easy death.

Going to Toulouse was another piece of damn foolishness. Thinking it over, I suspected as much. So I had no excuse. But following Robinson in his adventures, I had developed a taste for shady undertakings. Already in New York when I couldn't sleep, I racked my brains wondering if it mightn't be possible to go further and still further with Robinson. You sink, at first you're afraid in the darkness, but all the same you want to understand, and after that you never leave the depths. But there's too much. You can't understand so many things at once. Life is too short. You don't want to be unjust to anyone. You have scruples, you hesitate to make snap judgments, and worst of all, you're afraid to die while you're hesitating, because then you'd have been on earth for nothing whatsoever. And that's the worst of all.

Hurry, hurry, don't be late for your death. Sickness, the poverty that disperses your hours and years, the insomnia that paints whole days and weeks gray, the cancer that may even now, meticulous and blood-spotted, be climbing up from your rectum.

You'll never have time, you tell yourself. Not to speak of war, which is also, what with the criminal boredom of men, ready to rise up from the cellar that poor people shut themselves up in … you can never be sure … It's a moot point … Maybe all those who don't understand should have their throats cut … And perhaps other, new poor people should be born, and so forth and so on, until we get a crowd who understand the joke, the whole joke … Just as you mow a lawn until the grass is really right, really soft. On leaving the train at Toulouse I was in doubt what to do. But a bottle of beer at the station buffet set me strolling through the streets. An unfamiliar city is a fine thing. That's the time and place when, you can suppose that all the people you meet are nice. It's dream time. And because you're in a dream you can afford to waste a little time in the park. Still, after a certain age, unless you have gilt-edged reasons, people will think you've gone to the park to chase little girls like Parapine. So better not. You'll be safer in the pastry shop just before the park gate, the beautiful shop on the corner, as fancy as a brothel stage set, beveled mirrors studded with little birds. Deep in thought, you catch yourself eating burnt almonds *ad infinitum*. A place for seraphim. The young Jadies who work there babble furtively about their private affairs as follows:

"So I told him he could call for me on Sunday … My aunt heard him and made a terrible stick because of my father …"

"But hasn't your father remarried?" her friend breaks in.

"What has that got to do with it? … Even if he's remarried, he still has a right to know who his daughter's going out with …'

The other young lady in the shop was of the same opinion. The consequence was an impassioned controversy involving all three. Not wanting to disturb them, I sat quietly in my corner, stuffing myself uninterruptedly with tarts and cream puffs, which were excellent by the way, hoping that my discretion would help them solve their delicate problem of family priorities more quickly, but they made no progress. Nothing came of their discussion. Their speculative incompetence restricted them to an imprecise sort of hatred. Those shopgirls were bursting with illogicality, vanity, and ignorance. Drooling with rage, they whispered insults by the dozen.

I couldn't help it, I was fascinated by their nasty passion. I attacked the rum babas. I stopped counting the babas. So did they. I was hoping they'd come to some conclusion before I had to leave … But passion made them deaf and soon dumb. Tense, their venon spent, they rested in the shelter of the pastry counter, each one invincible, shut up in her shell, pinched, ruminating plans for a still more embittered comeback. At the first opportunity, she would?promptly this time-spew out all the angry, cutting absurdities she happened to know

about her little friend. And the occasion wouldn't be long in coming, she'd see to that … Scrapings of arguments aimed at nothing at all. In the end I sat down, the better for them to befuddle me with the unceasing sound of their words, intentions, thoughts, as on a shore where the ripples of unceasing passions never manage to get organized …

You listen, you wait, you hope, here, there, in the train, at the cafe, in the street, in drawing rooms, at the coincierge's, you listen and wait for evil to get organized as in wartime, but there's only waste motion, nothing is ever done, either by those unfortunate young ladies or by anyone else. No one comes to help us. An enormous babble, gray and monotonous, spread over life like an enormously discouraging mirage. Two ladies came in, and the muddle-headed charm of the ineffectual conversation spread out between the counter girls and myself was broken. The girls gave the new arrivals their eager and undivided attention, anticipating their requests and their least desires. They chose here and there and nibbled at the tarts and *petits fours*. When it came time to pay, they gushed polite phrases, and each insisted on offering the others little pastries to nibble that very minute. One declined most graciously, explaining at length and in confidence to the other ladies present, who took a keen interest, that her doctor had forbidden her all sweets, that her doctor was a genius, that he had done wonders in combating constipation in Toulouse and elsewhere, that he was well on his way to curing her of a retention of "number two," from which she had been suffering for more than ten years, thanks to a very special diet and a miraculous medicine known to him alone. The other ladies were not going to let themselves be outdone so easily in matters of constipation. Their own constipation defied comparison. They were up in arms. They demanded proofs. In response to their doubts, the lady observed simply that when moving her bowels she now broke wind, that it sounded like fireworks … that because of her new-style bowel movements, all well molded, solid, and substantial, she was obliged to take extra precautions … Sometimes these marvelous new feces of hers were so hard they gave her excruciating pain in the rectum … a tearing sensation! … So now she had to use vaseline before moving her bowels. Irrefutable. Thus convinced, the voluble ladies left the Petits Oiseaux pastry shop, accompanied to the threshold by the smiles of the entire staff.

The park across the way was a good place in which to rest, meditate briefly, and put my thoughts in order before going to look for my friend Robinson.

In provincial parks the benches, offering a view of flowerbeds overstuffed with cannas and daisies, are almost always empty on weekday mornings. Near the rock garden, on strictly captive waters, a small tin boat, encircled by floating ashes, was moored to the shore by a moldy rope. A sign announced that the skiff operated on Sunday and that a tour of the lake cost two francs.

How many years? … students? … phantoms?

In the corners of all parks there lie forgotten any number of little coffins engarlanded with dreams, thickets charged with promises, handkerchiefs full of everything. All a big joke. But that's enough daydreaming. Let's go looking for Robinson and his church of SainteEponime, and that crypt where he and the old woman are taking care of mummies. That's what I'd come for, so I'd better get going.

I took a carriage, and we meandered this way and that at a leisurely sort of trot, through the dark sunken streets of the old town, where the light catches between the roofs. Over cobbles and bridges we drove with a great clatter of wheels, behind a horse that was all shoes. They haven't burned any cities in the South for a long time. They've never been so old. Wars don't pass that way anymore.

We pulled up in front of SainteEponime on the stroke of noon. The crypt was a little further on, under a calvary. It was pointed out to me, in the middle of a small, parched garden. You entered the crypt through a sort of barricaded hole. From a distance I saw the caretaker, a young girl, and asked for news of my friend Robinson. She was just closing the door. She answered with a friendly smile, and the news she gave me was good. From where we were standing in that noonday light everything around us turned pink, and the worm-eaten stones of the church rose skyward, as though ready to melt into the air. Robinson's little friend must have been about twenty, with firm, wiry legs, a small, perfectly charming bust, and surmounting it a delicate, precisely etched face. Just the eyes may have been a little too black and attentive for my taste. Not at all the dreamy type. It was she who wrote Robinson's letters, the ones I had received. She went ahead of me to the vault with her precise gait, her shapely feet and ankles. She had the build of a good lay, and must have spread her legs very nicely when circumstances demanded. Short, hard hands with a strong grip, the hands of an ambitious working girl. A brisk little movement to turn the key. Shimmering heat all around us. Once she had the door open, she decided, in spite of the lunch hour, to show me through the vault. I was beginning to feel a little more relaxed. Behind her lantern we descended into increasing coolness. It was real nice. I pretended to stumble between two steps as an excuse for grabbing her by the arm. That made us laugh, and when we reached the clay floor at the bottom I kissed her a little on the neck. She protested at first, but not very much.

After a brief moment of affection, I wriggled round her belly like a love worm. Lecherously we moistened and remoistened our lips for our soul conversation. With one hand I crept slowly up her tensed thighs, it's fun with the lantern on the floor, because at the same time you can watch the muscles rippling over her legs. It's a position I can recommend. Ah!

Such moments are not to be missed. They put your eyes out of joint, but it's worth it. What gusto! What sudden good humor! The conversation resumed in a new tone of confidence and simplicity. Now we were friends. Asses first. We had just saved ten years.

"Do you often show people around?" I asked, puffing and putting my foot in it. But I quickly covered up: "Doesn't your mother sell candles at the church next door? … Father Protiste has told me about her."

"I only take Madame Henrouille's place during lunch hour," she answered. "In the afternoon I work for a dressmaker … On the Rue du Theatre … Did you pass the theater on your way here?"

Again she reassured me about Robinson. He was much better, in fact the specialist thought he'd soon see well enough to go out by himself. All that was most encouraging. As for Grandma Henrouille, she seemed delighted with the vault. She was doing good business and saving money. Only one difficulty, in the house where they were living, the bedbugs kept everybody awake, especially on stormy nights. So they burned sulfur. It seemed that Robinson often spoke of me, pleasantly what's more. One thing leading to another, we came around to the projected marriage, the circumstances and all.

I have to admit that with all that talk I still hadn't asked her name. Her name was Madelon.

She'd been born during the war. Their marriage plans, after all, suited me fine. Madelon was an easy name to remember. I figured she must know what she was doing in marrying Robinson … Even if he was getting better, he'd always be an invalid … And besides, she thought only his eyes were affected … But his nerves were shot, and so was his morale and everything else! I was almost going to tell her so, to warn her … I've never known how to steer conversations about marriage, or extricate myself from them. To change the subject, I expressed a keen and sudden interest in the cellar and its occupants. People came a long way to see it, so as long as I was there why not take a look?

With her little lantern Madelon and I made the shadows of the corpses emerge from the wall one by one. They must have given the tourists food for thought! Those ancient stiffs were lined up against the wall as if a firing squad had worked them over … They weren't exactly skin and bone anymore, or clothing either … Just a little of all that … In a very grimy state, and full of holes. Time had been gnawing at their skin for centuries and was still at it … Here and there it was still tearing away bits of their faces … enlarging all the holes and even finding long strips of epidermis that death had left clinging to their cartilage. Their bellies had emptied of everything, and now there were little cradles of shadow where their navels had been.

Madelon explained that to get into this condition the bodies had had to spend more than five hundred years in a quicklime cemetery. You wouldn't have taken them for corpses. Their corpse days were far behind them. By easy stages they had come closer and closer to dust. In that cellar there were big ones and little ones, six and twenty in all, who asked for nothing better than to enter into Eternity. They weren't being admitted yet. Two women with bonnets perched on top of their skeletons, a hunchback, a giant, and even a complete baby, with a kind of bib, lace if you please, around his tiny dried-out neck, and some bits and pieces of swaddling clothes.

Grandma Henrouille was making a lot of money out of these scrapings of the centuries. To think that when I last saw her she herself had looked very much like these spooks … So then Madelon and I went slowly back, passing them by again. One by one their so-called heads stood silent in the harsh circle of lamp light. It's not exactly night they have in their eye sockets, it's almost a gaze, but gentler, like the gaze of those who know. More disturbing is their smell of dust, it catches in your nose.

Whenever a party of tourists showed up, Grandma Henrouille was on the spot. She made those stiffs work like circus performers. At the height of the summer season, they brought her in a hundred francs a day.

"Don't they look sad?" Madelon asked me. A ritual question. Death didn't mean a thing to that cutie. She had been born during the war, when death came easy. But I knew well how people die. Something I had learned. It's very painful. It's all right to tell the tourists that these dead are happy. They can't speak for themselves. Grandma Henrouille even clouted them on the belly when there was enough parchment left on it, and it went "boom boom." But even that's no proof of good cheer. Finally Madelon and I got back to our own affairs. So it was true that Robinson was better. That was good enough for me. Our little friend seemed bent on this marriage. She must have been bored to death in Toulouse. You didn't often meet a man who had traveled as much as Robinson. What stories he had to tell! True ones and not so true. He'd already spoken to them at

length of America and the Tropics. Lovely!

I'd been in America and the Tropics too. I knew stories about them too and proposed to tell her some. Come to think of it, I had traveled with Robinson, and that's how we'd got to be friends. The lantern went out. We lit it ten times while arranging the past and the future. She wouldn't let me touch her breasts, said they were much too sensitive. But seeing that Grandma Henrouille would be coming back from her lunch any minute, we had to climb back to the daylight over the steep, rickety staircase, which was as difficult to negotiate as a ladder. I made a note of those stairs.

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Because of the treacherous narrow stairs Robinson didn't often go down to the mummy cellar. Most of the time he stood at the door, giving the tourists a bit of sales talk and getting used to taking in a few specks of light here and there.

Meanwhile in the depths, Grandma Henrouille managed very well. She knocked herself out with the mummies., enlivening the tourists' visit with a little speech about her parchment stiffs. "They're not at all repulsive, ladies and gentlemen, because, as you see, they were preserved in quicklime … for more than five centuries … Our collection is the only one of its kind in the whole world … The flesh is gone, of course … Only the skin is left, but it's tanned … They're naked, but not indecent … You will observe that a baby was buried at the same time as its mother … The baby is also extremely well preserved … And that tall man with the lace shirt that he still has on … He's got every one of his teeth … You will observe …" At the end of the tour she clouted them all on the chest?it sounded like a drum.

"Observe, ladies and gentlemen, that this one has only one eye left … all dried out … and the tongue too … it's like leather!" She gave it a pull. "He's sticking his tongue out, but he's not nasty … You can give what you like as you leave, ladies and gentlemen, but the usual is two francs each and half price for children … You can touch them before you go … convince yourself … but please, ladies and gentlemen, don't pull too hard … they're extremely fragile …"

Grandma Henrouille had wanted to raise the prices as soon as she got there, she applied to the Diocese. But it wasn't so simple, because of the priest at Sainte-Eponime, who demanded a third of the take all for himself, and also because of Robinson, who kept griping, because in his opinion she wasn't giving him a big enough rake-off.

"I've been took!" he concluded. "Took for a sucker! … Again! … I never have any luck! … The old bag's cellar, you know … it brings in a fortune! … Believe you me, she's raking it in!"

"But you didn't put any money into the business," I argued to calm him down and put some sense into him … "And you're well fed! Well taken care of!" But Robinson was as stubborn as a mule, he felt persecuted and that was that. He refused to understand, to resign himself.

"All in all," I said, "you've come out of a nasty business pretty well! So don't complain!

You'd have gone straight to Cayenne if they'd nabbed you … Here nobody's bothering you! … And you've found little Madelon who's a sweet kid and willing to put up with you … despite the state of your health … So what have you got to complain about? … Especially now that your eyes are getting better …"

"You seem to be saying I don't know what I'm complaining about," he said then. "But I feel I've got to complain … that's the way it is … it's all I've got left … that's right … It's the only thing they let me do … Nobody's forced to listen."

True enough, he did nothing but complain whenever we were alone. I had come to dread those confidential moments. I looked at him with his blinking eyes which still oozed a little in the sunlight, and I said to myself that all things considered Robinson was not endearing. There are animals like that, they can be innocent, unhappy, anything you please, you know it, and still you don't like them. There's something wrong with them.

"You could have died in jail …" I tried again, determined to make him think.

"I've been in jail … It's no worse than where I am now! … You're out of date …" He hadn't told me he'd been in jail. That must have been before we met, before the war. He pressed his point and concluded: "Take it from me. There's only one kind of freedom, only one, to see properly and have your pockets full of money. The rest is bullshit! …"

"So what, exactly, do you want?" I asked him. When he was challenged like that to make up his mind, to speak up, he deflated. And that's just when it might have been interesting …

During the day, while Madelon was working for the dressmaker and Grandma Henrouille was exhibiting her mummies, we went to a cafe under the trees. Robinson was crazy about that cafe under the trees, probably because of the noise the birds made up above us. Millions of them! Especially about five o'clock when they came home to their nests, all keyed up by the summer. They swooped down on the square like a storm. There was a story about a barber who had his shop across from the park and had gone crazy just from hearing them cheep for years and years. It's true we couldn't hear each other talk. Robinson thought it was cheerful.

“If only she’d give me twenty centimes per visitor and be regular about it, I’d be satisfied.” About every fifteen minutes he’d get back to his preoccupation. In between, the colors of times past seemed to come back to him, incidents too, stories, among others, about the Compagnie Pordurière in Africa, which both of us had known well after all, and some hairy tales that he’d never told me before. Maybe he hadn’t dared. He was kind of reticent in a way, I’d even say secretive.

Speaking of the past, what I remembered best when I was in good spirits was Molly, like the echo of a clock striking in the distance. When something pleasant popped into my mind, I always thought of her.

After all, when our egoism lets us go for a while, when it comes time to throw it off, the only women whose memory you cherish in your hearts are the ones who really loved men a little, not just one man, even if it was you, but the whole lot.

When we left the cafe that evening, we hadn’t done a thing, we could have been retired noncoms.

During the season, there was a steady flow of tourists. They hung around the crypt and Grandma Henrouille always got them to laugh. Her jokes weren’t exactly to the priest’s taste, but, since he was collecting more than his share, he didn’t say boo, and besides smutty jokes were over his head. Be that as it may, Grandma Henrouille was worth seeing and hearing in the midst of her corpses. She looked you straight in the eye, she wasn’t in the least afraid of death; wrinkled and shriveled as she was, you’d have thought she was one of them, coming along with her lantern to shoot the shit right in what passed for their faces.

When we got back to the house and foregathered for dinner, we discussed the day’s take, and Grandma Henrouille called me her “little old Dr. Jackal” because of the dealings we’d had in Rancy. All in a bantering tone, of course. Madelon bustled about in the kitchen. That joint where we were staying got only the measliest light, it was an annex of the sacristy, very cramped, all cluttered with joists and struts and dusty crannies. “Yes,” said the old woman, “it’s practically always night in here, so to speak, but you can still find your bed, your pockets, and your mouth. That’s good enough for me.”

She hadn’t grieved for long after her son’s death. “He was always very delicate,” she said to me one evening. “Look, I’m seventy-six and I’ve never complained! … He complained all the time, it was his way, exactly like your Robinson … just to give you an example. Take the stairs to the crypt, for instance … They’re tough, you’ll agree … You’ve been down there … They knock me out, of course they do, but some days they’re worth as much as two francs a step to me … I’ve figured it out … Well, for that price I’d climb up to heaven if anyone asked me to!”

Madelon put lots of spices in our food, and tomatoes as well. It was great. And we drank rosé. Even Robinson had taken to wine now that he was living in the South. He had already told me everything that had happened since his arrival in Toulouse, so I had stopped listening. To tell the truth, I was kind of disappointed in him, and disgusted. “You’re a bourgeois!” I told him finally (at that time I could think of no worse insult). “All you ever think of is money … Once you recover your eyesight, you’ll be the worst of the whole bunch.”

Hard words couldn’t get him down. They seemed on the contrary to give him a lift. Besides, he knew it was true. The man’s all set, I said to myself, no need to trouble my head about him … You can’t get around it, a little woman like that, slightly on the violent, depraved side, will change a man beyond recognition … For a long time, I said to myself, I thought this Robinson was made for adventures, but cuckold or not, blind or not, he’s only a cheap punk … Neither more nor less.

In addition, Grandma Henrouille had contaminated him with her mania for saving, and so had Madelon with her desire to be married. That settled it. He was washed up. Especially as he’d got to like the girl more and more. I knew something about that. I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t a little jealous, it wouldn’t be true. Madelon and I got together for short moments now and then, before dinner in her room. But those interviews were hard to arrange. We never spoke of them. We were as discreet as could be.

Don’t go thinking on that account that she didn’t love her Robinson. There’s no connection. It was just that he was playing at being engaged, so naturally she played at being faithful. That’s how it was between them. As long as they saw eye to eye, that was the main thing. As he told me, he wasn’t going to touch her until they were married. It was his idea. So he’d have eternity, and I’d have the here and now. He was also planning, so he told me, to set himself up in a small restaurant with Madelon, and run out on Grandma Henrouille. He really meant business. “She’s nice, the customers will like her,” he foresaw in his more cheerful moments. “And say, you’ve tasted her cooking … When it comes to the eats, she hasn’t her equal.”

He even thought he could touch Grandma Henrouille for a bit of capital to start with. All right with me, but I suspected that he’d have a hard time persuading her. “You see everything through rose-colored glasses,” I

said, just to calm him down and make him think a little. At that he began to cry and call me a heartless bastard. To tell the truth, you should never discourage anybody. I admitted that I was wrong, that my trouble was my black thoughts, and that all things considered, they were what had wrecked my life. Robinson's gimmick before the war had been copperplate engraving, but he wouldn't have anything more to do with it, not at any price. That was his business. "With my lungs I need fresh air, and anyway my eyes will never be the same." In a way he was right. What could I say? When we walked through busy streets together, people turned around to pity the blind man. People have plenty of pity in them for the infirm and the blind, they really have love in reserve. I'd often sensed that love they have in reserve. There's an enormous lot of it, and no one can say different. But it's a shame that people should go on being so crummy with so much love in reserve. It just doesn't come out, that's all. It's caught inside and there it stays, it doesn't do them a bit of good. They die of love?inside.

After dinner Madelon would devote herself to her "little Léon," as she called him. She read the newspaper out loud. He was wild about politics at the time, and the papers in the South pustulated with politics, of the juciest kind.

Around us in the evening the house would sink into the dilapitude of the centuries. That's the time, after dinner, when the bedbugs come out for the corrida and also the time to test the corrosive formula which I hoped to sell to some pharmacist at a small profit later on. A modest racket. My invention amused Grandma Henrouille, and she helped me with my experiments. Together we went from nest to nest, from crack to cranny, and sprayed their swarms with my vitriol. They scurried and vanished in the light of the candle that Grandma Henrouille conscientiously held for me.

While at our work, we talked about Rancy. Just thinking about the place gave me the collywobbles, I'd have stayed in Toulouse for the rest of my life. What more did I want, after all, than my daily bread and some time to myself? Happiness in short. Still, I had to think about going back to work. Time was passing, and so were the Abbé Protiste's bonus and my savings.

Before leaving, I thought I'd teach Madelon a thing or two, and give her a bit of advice. Of course it's better to give money when you can afford it and you want to help. But you can also do good by warning a person, telling them exactly what's what and especially about the risks of fucking right and left. That's what I said to myself, because I was really worried about Madelon catching something. She was a smart little number, but no one could have been more ignorant about microbes. So I started explaining in great detail that she should take a close look before responding to advances. If it was red … if there was a drop at the end … In short, the classical and exceedingly useful things that everyone should know. After listening attentively and hearing me out, she protested for the sake of form. She even made something of a scene, assuring me … that she was a "respectable" girl … that I should be ashamed of myself … that I had a foul opinion of her … because she'd done it with me … that

I despised her … that all men were beastly …

Anyway, the kind of thing they say in a case like that … I might have expected it … Window dressing. What mattered to me was that she had listened carefully to my advice and grasped the essential. The rest didn't mean a thing. After hearing what I had to say, what really saddened her was that you could catch all those things I'd been telling her about just from affection and pleasure. Even if nature was to blame, she thought I was fully as disgusting as nature, and that offended her. I carried the matter no further, except for a few words about condoms, which are so convenient. After that we played psychologist and tried to analyze Robinson's character just a little. "He's not exactly jealous," she said to me.

"But he has his difficult moments."

"That's neither here nor there," I said, and launched into a description of Robinson's character, as if I knew his character, but I noticed right away that I didn't know Robinson at all, except for a few obvious and glaring features. Nothing more.

It's amazing how hard it is to imagine what can make one person pleasing to another … You want to do someone a favor, to be helpful, and all you do is make a fool of yourself … It's pitiful, the moment you open your mouth … you flounder. Nowadays it's not easy to be La Bruyère. The whole unconscious skedaddles the moment you go near it.

Just as I was about to buy my ticket, they got me to stay … for another week, we agreed. The idea was to show me the country around Toulouse, the cool banks of the river I'd heard so much about, and especially they wanted me to see the beautiful vineyards on the outskirts, that everyone in town seemed to take pleasure and pride in, as if they were all part owners. They wouldn't think of letting me leave like that, when I hadn't

seen anything but Grandma Henrouille's corpses. It was unthinkable! Well anyway, soft soap … I was paralyzed by so much kindness. I didn't dare seem too eager to stay, because of my intimacy with Madelon, which was getting kind of dangerous. The old woman was beginning to suspect something between us. A strain in the air.

But the old woman wasn't coming with us on this excursion. In the first place she didn't want to close her crypt, not for a single day. So I agreed to stay on, and one Sunday morning we set out for the country. Robinson walked between us, we held him by the arms. At the station we took second-class tickets. Even so, the compartment smelled strongly of sausage, just the same as third class. We got off at a place called Saint-Jean. Madelon seemed familiar with the region, and right away she began meeting acquaintances from this village and that village. It looked like a fine day coming on. As we walked along, we had to tell Robinson everything we saw. "Here there's a garden … That's a bridge over there, and on top of it there's a man fishing … He's not catching anything … Watch out for the bicycle …" But the smell of French fries gave him his direction all right. In fact it was he who dragged us to a bar where they served French fries for fifty centimes a portion. I'd always known that Robinson was fond of French fries. So am I. It's a Parisian taste. Madelon preferred vermouth, dry and straight.

Rivers aren't happy in the South. They seem to be sick, always drying up. Hills, sun, fishermen, fish, boats, ditches, wash troughs, vines, weeping willows?all want some, all clamor for water. Much too much water is demanded of them, so there isn't much left in the riverbed. In places it looks more like a badly flooded road than a genuine river. Seeing we'd come for pleasure, we had to hurry up and find some. When we'd finished our French fries, we thought we'd take a little boatride before lunch, that would be fun, me rowing of course, the two of them, Robinson and Madelon, facing me, hand in hand.

So off we go, merrily down the stream as they say, scraping the bottom here and there, she letting out squeals and he not quite easy in his mind either. Flies and more flies. Dragonflies everywhere, watching the river out of their big eyes and giving frightened little flicks of their tails. Amazing heat that makes the surface steam. We glide over the water from those long flat eddies back there to this tangle of dead branches … We hug the burning bank, looking for whiffs of shade that we grab as best we can under a few trees not too riddled with sunshine. Talking makes you even hotter, if that's possible. On the other hand, you're afraid to admit you're not comfortable.

Robinson, naturally enough, was the first to be fed up with navigation. I suggested landing near a restaurant. We weren't the only ones to have that little idea. Every fisherman on that reach of the river was already settled at the bistrot before us, jealously nursing his *apéritif*, entrenched behind a siphon. Robinson didn't dare ask me if this cafe I had chosen was expensive, but I set his mind at rest by assuring him that the prices were posted and perfectly reasonable. It was true. He never let go of his Madelon's hand the whole while. Now it can be told that we paid our bill at the restaurant as if we had eaten, but we had only tried to eat. The less said of the dishes they served us the better. They're still there. After that, to spend the afternoon, it would have been too complicated to arrange a fishing party, and it would have made Robinson unhappy because he wouldn't even have seen his float. As for me, I was sick and tired of rowing, just from the morning's effort. That had been plenty. The training I'd had on the rivers of Africa was far behind me. I had aged in that as in everything else.

For a change of exercise, I suggested that a little walk along the bank would do us a lot of good, at least as far as the tall grass you could see up there less than a mile away, not far from that line of poplars.

So there we went, Robinson and I arm in arm, and Madelon a few steps ahead of us. It was easier that way through the grass. At a bend in the river we heard accordions. The sound came from a barge, a beautiful barge moored at that point in the river. The music attracted Robinson. Which was understandable in his situation, and besides he had always had a weakness for music. Glad to have found something that amused him, we parked right there on the grass, which wasn't as dusty as on the slanting bank nearby. We could see that it wasn't any ordinary barge. It was neat and well turned out, not meant for hauling anything, more of a houseboat than a barge, with flowers all over it and even a spanking little kennel for the dog. We described the houseboat to Robinson. He wanted to know all about it.

"I'd like to live on a clean little boat like that myself," he said then. "How about you?" he asked Madelon …

"I see what you mean," she replied. "But that's an expensive idea you've got, Léon! I'm sure it would cost you a lot more than an apartment house …"

We all started reckoning how much that kind of a houseboat might cost, and we couldn't get together … Each of us insisted on his own figure … Regardless of what we were counting, our class of people used to do it out loud … Meanwhile, the accordion music came over to us as caressingly as you please, we could even hear the

words of a song they were singing … Finally we agreed that the houseboat, just as it was, must be worth at least a hundred thousand francs … A figure to set you dreaming …

Close your lovely eyes, for the hours are short …

In the wonderful land, the beautiful land of drea-eams …

That's what they were singing inside the boat, men's and women's voices mixed, a little out of tune, but very pleasant all the same because of the setting. It went with the heat and the country and the time of day and the river.

Robinson persisted in driving his estimates sky-high. The way we'd described the houseboat, he was sure it would cost a lot more … Because it had a big glass window to let in more light and brass fittings all over, luxury in short …

"Léon, you're knocking yourself out." Madelon tried to quiet him. "Why don't you stretch out on this nice thick grass and rest a while … A hundred thousand or five hundred thousand, who cares? … You haven't got it and neither have I … So really there's no sense in working yourself up …"

He lay down, but he kept working himself up about the price all the same, he wanted to know for sure, and he wanted to see this houseboat that cost so much …

"Has it got a motor?" he asked … We didn't know.

Just to please him, since he insisted, I took a look at the stern, to see if I'd see the exhaust pipe of a small motor.

Close your lovely eyes, for life is a dream …

Love is a fan-ta-sy …

Close your lovely eyes!

The people in there went on singing. We were drooping with fatigue … They were putting us to sleep.

Suddenly the spaniel came bounding out of the kennel and stood on the gangplank barking in our direction. We woke with a start, and we gave the spaniel hell. He had frightened Robinson.

So then a character who seemed to be the owner came out on deck through the little cabin door. He said he wouldn't stand for anybody shouting at his dog, and we talked back. But when he noticed that Robinson was as good as blind, the man calmed down and felt foolish. He changed his mind about bawling us out and even let us call him a few names to get even. To make up for his rudeness, he invited us to come and have coffee on his boat, to celebrate, he added, his birthday. He wouldn't hear of our baking out there in the sun, and so forth and so on … And besides it was lucky we'd turned up, because they were thirteen at table … He was a young man, an eccentric … He liked boats, he explained … We could see that. But his wife was afraid of the sea, so they had moored their boat out here, on the beach, so to speak … We went aboard, and everybody seemed glad to have us … First of all his wife, a fine-looking woman, who played the accordion like an angel. Anyway, it was nice of them to have us over for coffee. We could have been almost anybody. It was trusting of them … We realized right off that it wouldn't do to shame our charming hosts … Especially in front of their guests … Robinson had his faults, but as a rule he had a certain fine feeling. Just by the sound of their voices he realized that we had to behave and abstain from bad language. True, we weren't very well dressed, but we were neat and clean. The owner of the houseboat, I looked him over, must have been about thirty, with poetic brown hair and a nice sailor-type suit, but custom-made. And his attractive wife had really "velvety" eyes.

They had just finished lunch. Plenty of leftovers. We didn't say no to a piece of cake, certainly not. Or a glass of port to go with it. I hadn't heard such high-class voices in a long time. High-class people have a certain way of talking that intimidates you and frightens me personally, especially their women. It's really just a lot of half-baked, pretentious phrases, but as highly polished as antique furniture. Meaningless as they are, their phrases are terrifying. When you try to answer, you're afraid of slipping up. And even when they take the tone of the gutter and amuse themselves singing the songs of the poor, they hang on to that high-class accent, which inspires suspicion and antipathy. That accent always has the kind of whiplash that's needed for talking to servants. It's sexy, but it makes you want to tumble their women, just to see their dignity, as they call it, melt away. In a whisper I told Robinson about the furniture, all antiques. The place reminded me a little of my mother's shop, except naturally it was cleaner and more orderly. My mother's shop always smelled of old pepper.

The walls all around were hung with paintings by the owner. A painter, as his wife told me with lots of simper and gush. His wife loved her man all right. He was an artist, nice penis, nice hair, nice income, everything needed to make a woman happy; in addition, she had her accordion, her friends, her reveries on the meager, swirling water, she was quite content never to go anywhere … Here they had all that plus all the sweet coolness in the world, enclosed between the half-curtains and the breath of the ventilator. And God-given security besides.

Seeing we were there, we thought we might as well make ourselves at home. Iced drinks, then strawberries and cream, my favorite dessert. Wriggling and simpering, Madelon accepted a second helping. She too was improving her manners. The men were taken with Madelon, especially the rich father-in-law. He seemed delighted to have Madelon beside him and went to no end of trouble to give her pleasure. He ransacked the whole table for delicacies just for her, and she lit into them with such enthusiasm that the tip of her nose was soon covered with whipped cream. To judge by the conversation, the father-in-law was a widower. If so, he'd forgotten it. Soon, what with the liqueurs, Madelon was tipsy. The suit Robinson was wearing and mine, too, showed signs of fatigue, of seasons and more seasons, but maybe in that dim light no one would notice. Still, I felt rather humiliated among those people, so comfortable in all respects, as clean as Americans, so well washed and well groomed, fit for a fashion parade.

Once liquored up, Madelon didn't behave so well. Aiming her little profile at the pictures, she started talking rubbish. The hostess noticed and took to the accordion again to gloss it over. Everybody sang, the three of us joined in under our breaths, but listlessly and out of tune, the same song as we'd been listening to outside, and then another. Robinson had managed to strike up a conversation with an elderly gentleman who seemed to know all there was to know about growing cacao trees. A splendid subject. A gettogether between colonials. To my amazement I hear Robinson saying: "When I was out in Africa? I was working for the Compagnie Pordurière in those days as their agronomist in chief? I used to mobilize a whole village to harvest the crop …" And more of the same. He couldn't see me, so he gave himself free rein … The sky was the limit … Phony memories … He really gave the old gentleman an earful … A pack of lies … Anything he could think of to put himself in the class of the old gentleman, who was really an expert. It exasperated and dismayed me to hear Robinson, who had always been rather reserved in company, shooting off his mouth like that.

They'd given him a place of honor in the depths of a big scented sofa. In his right hand he held a glass of brandy, while his left hand, with sweeping gestures, evoked the majesty of the untamed forests and the fury of the equatorial tornado. He was launched, well launched … Alcide would have had a good laugh if he could have been there in the corner. Poor Alcide!

I can't deny it, we were very comfortable on their houseboat, especially as a light breeze had come up on the river and, framed in the windows, the fluted curtains began to flutter like merry and cool little flags.

More ices were served and then another round of champagne. It was the owner's birthday, he told us so a dozen times. For once he had decided to give everyone, even the wayfarer, pleasure. For once that was us. For an hour or two or possibly three, we would all be reconciled under his aegis, we'd all be pals, the known, the unknown, even strangers, even we three whom they had picked up on the riverbank *faute de mieux*, so as not to be thirteen at table. I was going to start singing my little song of good cheer, but then I changed my mind, suddenly too proud, too conscious. At that point, to justify their invitation that lay heavy on my mind, I saw fit to reveal that in my person they were entertaining one of the most distinguished physicians of Greater Paris! They could hardly have suspected it from my dress! Or from the low estate of my companions for that matter! But the moment they knew who I was, they declared themselves delighted and flattered, and every one of them started telling me about his very special little ailments. I took the opportunity to make friends with a tycoon's daughter, a sturdy young cousin of the skipper's, who suffered from hives and developed acid stomach on the slightest provocation.

When you're not used to the comfort and luxuries of the table, they go to your head in no time. Truth is always glad to leave you. With next to no encouragement it will set you free. And we manage very nicely without it. Amid this sudden plethora of comforts a fine megalomaniacal delirium finds no difficulty in overwhelming you. I started telling tall ones in my turn, intermittently discussing hives with the young cousin. You extricate yourself from your daily humiliations by trying, like Robinson, to put yourself on a level with the rich by means of lies, the currency of the poor. We're all ashamed of our ungainly flesh, our inadequate carcasses. I couldn't make up my mind to show them my truth; it was as unworthy of them as my rear end. I had to make a good impression at all costs. I started answering their questions with fantasies, same as Robinson had done in his confab with the old gentleman. I, too, was invaded by pride! …. My enormous clientele! … The dreadful overwork! … My friend Robinson … the agronomist who had offered me the hospitality of his chalet … on the outskirts of Toulouse …

And besides, when your table companion has eaten well and had plenty to drink, he's easily convinced.

Luckily! Anything goes! Robinson had preceded me in the furtive delights of impromptu cock-and-bull; it cost me very little effort to follow in his footsteps. Because of the smoked glasses he was wearing, the people couldn't see exactly what was wrong with Robinson's eyes. We generously attributed his misfortune to the war. From then on we were sitting pretty, raised first socially, then patriotically, to the level of the other guests, who had been rather taken aback at first by the whimsy of the painter husband, though to be sure his status as a fashionable artist obliged him now and then to do something weird and unexpected … The guests began to find all three of us ever so charming and inconceivably interesting.

Maybe Madelon didn't play her role of fiancee as modestly as she should have; she got everybody including the women so hot and bothered I was afraid the party would end in an orgy. It didn't. Gradually the sentences became undone, defeated by slobbering attempts to go beyond words. Nothing happened.

Tangled in phrases and cushions, fuddled by our collective effort to make one another happy, more deeply, more warmly happier by the spirit alone since our bodies were replete, we did everything possible to suffuse the present moment with all the pleasure in the world, with every marvel known to us in and outside of ourselves, so that our neighbor might at last get the full advantage of it and confess to us that this was the very miracle he was looking for, that this gift from us was just what had been lacking for so and so many years to his eternal happiness! That we at last had revealed to him the reason of his own being!

And he was going to tell all and sundry that he had found the reason of his being. So we'd down another bumper together to celebrate our joy! May our joy endure forever! And may this charm never be broken! May we, above all, never never relapse into those abominable days when there were no miracles, the days before we met and miraculously found one another! … All of us together from this moment on! At last! And for ever!

The skipper couldn't restrain himself from breaking the charm.

He had this mania for talking about his painting, it was really too much on his mind, about his pictures, come what may and a propos of anything or nothing. Thanks to his obstinate idiocy, crushing banality returned, drunk as we were, to our midst. Defeated, I went over to the skipper and delivered myself of a few heartfelt and high-flown compliments, the sweet words in which artists delight. Just what he needed. My compliments hit him like an orgasm. He slumped down on one of the overblown sofas and fell asleep almost instantly, as sweetly as you please, palpably happy. The others meanwhile studied the contours of one another's faces with a leaden gaze of mutual fascination, torn between almost irresistible somnolence and the delights of heavensent digestion.

As for me, I suspended my desire to doze, saving it up for the night. Only too often the day's lingering fears banish sleep, so when you're lucky enough to build up a small stock of beatitude, you have to be a born fool to squander it in futile preliminary catnaps. Keep it for the night, that's my motto! Always be thinking of the night. Besides, we'd been invited to dinner, so it was time to be working up a fresh appetite …

We took advantage of the prevailing stupor to slip away. The three of us managed a discreet exit, dodging the slumbering guests dispersed around the hostess's accordion. Softened by music, the hostess's eyes blinked in search of darkness. "See you later," she said as we passed. Her smile ended in a dream.

We didn't go very far, only to the place where I'd noticed a bend in the river, between two rows of tall, pointed poplars. From there you can see the whole valley, and in the distance a village in its hollow, huddled round a church tower planted like a nail in the reddening sky. Madelon was anxious. "What time is there a train back?" she asked.

"Don't worry," we assured her. "They'll take us by car. It's all arranged. The skipper said so … They've got one …"

That was enough for Madelon. She was dreamy with happiness. It had really been a splendid day.

"Léon," she asked him. "How do your eyes feel now?"

"Much better. I didn't want to tell you before because I wasn't sure, but I think, especially with the left eye, it's getting so I can count the bottles on the table … I drank quite a lot, did you notice? Good stuff too!"

"The left is the heart side!" said Madelon joyfully. Naturally she was happy about his eyes being better.

"Come," she suggested, "you kiss me and I'll kiss you." Their effusions were making me feel in the way. But it was hard for me to leave because I didn't know where to go. I made as if to do my business behind a nearby tree and stayed there, waiting for their seizure to pass. They said things full of tenderness. I heard them. The dullest love dialogues are kind of amusing when you know the people. And I'd never heard them talk like that

before.

“Do you really love me?” she asked.

“I love you as much as I love my eyes!” was his answer.

“Oh Léon, that’s a beautiful thing to say! … But you haven’t seen me yet, Léon … Maybe when you see me with your own eyes and not just through other people’s, you won’t love me so much … When that time comes, you’ll see other women, and maybe you’ll love them all … The way your friends do …”

That remark, made in an undertone, was a dig at me … I hadn’t the slightest doubt. She thought I was far away and couldn’t hear her … So she let loose … She lost no time … Robinson started protesting. “Hey there!” Slander, malicious gossip, he assured her.

“Me! Certainly not! Oh no, Madelon!” he defended himself, “That’s not my way at all!

What makes you think I’m like him? … When you’ve been so good to me! … I’m the faithful sort! I’m no skirt chaser! When I give my word it’s for always! You’re beautiful, I know that already, but you’ll be even more beautiful when I see you … There! Are you happy now? Not crying any more? What more can I tell you?”

“Oh Léon! You’re so sweet!” she said, cuddling up to him. Then they were swearing to love each other forever and ever and nothing could stop them, the heavens weren’t big enough.

“I want you to always be happy with me! …” he said very gently. “With nothing to do and everything you need all the same …”

“Oh, how good you are, my sweet Léon! You’re even better than I thought … So tender! … So faithful! … So everything!”

“It’s because I adore you, my pussycat …”

And they worked each other up even further by necking. And then, as if to shut me out of their intense happiness, they gave me a kidney punch …

She started off: “Your friend the doctor! Isn’t he a nice one!” And then she repeated, as if the thought of me stuck in her craw. “He’s a nice one all right! … I wouldn’t want to say anything against him, because he’s a friend of yours … But I have a feeling that he’s a brute with women … I don’t like to say anything bad about him, because I think he’s really fond of you … But, you know, he’s not my type … I’ll tell you something … You’re sure it won’t make you mad?” No, nothing would make Léon mad. “Well, I’d say the doctor is too hot on women … Kind of like a dog, see what I mean? … What do you think? … I get the feeling that he’s ready to jump every last one of them! He does his nasty business, and then he makes himself scarce … Don’t you think so? Don’t you think he’s like that?” The bastard thought everything she wanted him to think, in fact he agreed that in addition to being right everything she said was screamingly funny. So funny he could die laughing. He encouraged her to go on and almost split a gut.

“Yes, Madelon, what you say is perfectly true! Ferdinand isn’t a bad sort, but delicacy isn’t his strong point, I don’t mind telling you, nor fidelity either! … Take my word for it! …”

“Has he had lots of mistresses? You must know, Léon.”

The bitch. She was fishing for information.

“Plenty,” he replied with assurance, “but you know … he’s not hard to please …” Some conclusion had to be drawn from this exchange, and Madelon proceeded to draw one.

“Doctors are mostly all pigs, everybody knows that … But if you ask me, he’s a champion!”

“You’ve never said truer words,” my good and faithful friend approved her. And he went on: “It’s so bad, he’s such a sex fiend, I’ve often thought he took drugs … And say, the man’s equipment! If you could see it! Huge! Monstrous! It’s not natural! …”

“Really?” said Madelon, perplexed, trying to remember my equipment. “You think he’s got some disease?” She was worried, suddenly dismayed by those intimate revelations.

“I don’t know about that,” he was regretfully obliged tc admit. “I can’t tell for sure … But it wouldn’t surprise me with the life he leads.”

“Yes, you’re right … he must take drugs … That must be why he’s so strange sometimes …”

Madelon’s little head was working hard, and she added: “We’d better be careful from now on …”

“What’s the matter?” he asked. “You afraid of him? He isn’t anything to you, I hope? … He hasn’t ever made you any advances, has he?”

“No, of course not. I wouldn’t have let him. But you never know what he might take it into his head … Suppose he threw a fit, for instance … Those dope fiends have fits, you know! … But one thing is sure, I’d never go to him if I were sick!”

“Neither would I, now you bring it up!” Robinson approved. After which there was more mushing and petting …

“Honey lamb!” she cooed.

“Kitten … Kitten!” he replied. And silences in between, punctuated by barrages of kisses.

“See how many times you can tell me you love me while I kiss you as far as your shoulder …”

That little game began at the top of the neck.

“I’m as red as a beet!” she cried, panting. “I’m suffocating! Air! Air!” But he didn’t let her breathe. He started all over again. Sitting in the grass nearby, I tried to see what would happen. He took her nipples between his lips and toyed with them. Innocent pastimes. I was all red in the face myself for a variety of reasons and in addition amazed at my own indiscretion.

“We’ll be very happy, won’t we, Léon? Tell me you’re sure we’ll be happy.” Then came an intermission. And then endless plans for the future, enough plans to make a whole new world, but a world only for the two of them. I, most especially, wasn’t in it at all. It looked as if they’d never finish getting rid of me, sweeping my nasty image out of their life.

“Have you been friends with Ferdinand a long time?”

The question was nagging at her …

“Oh yes, for years … in different places …” he answered. “First we just happened to meet, on our travels … He likes going to strange places … So do I in a way, and for a long time we traveled together … See?” He reduced our life together to the flattest banality.

“Well,” she said with crisp determination. “You’re not going to be such good friends anymore … From now on! … It’s going to stop! It is going to stop, isn’t it, pussycat? … From now on I’ll be your only companion … Understand? … How about it, sweetie?”

“What’s wrong? You jealous of him?” In spite of himself he was rather disconcerted, the dope.

“No, I’m not jealous of him, but you see, Léon, I love you too much, I want you all to myself … I don’t want to share you with anybody … And he’s not the kind of person you should associate with now that I love you, Léon … He’s too immoral … Understand? Tell me you adore me, Léon! Tell me you understand!”

“I adore you …”

“That’s good.”

We got back to Toulouse that same night.

The accident happened two days later. It was time for me to be leaving after all, and I was just packing my suitcase before starting for the station when I heard someone shouting outside the house. I listened … They wanted me to come quick and hurry down to the crypt … I couldn’t see the person who was shouting that way. But to judge by the tone of voice, it must have been terribly urgent … They wanted me to go there right away!

“Just a minute,” I say. “Where’s the fire!” I didn’t feel like hurrying. It must have been about seven o’clock, just before dinnertime. We were supposed to say good-bye at the station, we’d arranged it that way … That was convenient for everybody, because the old woman would be coming home a little later than usual. She was expecting a whole crowd of pilgrims at the crypt that evening.

“Come quick, doctor!” The voice in the street shouted again. “Madame Henrouille has had an accident!”

“Okay! Okay! Okay! … I’ll be right down.”

But in less than a moment I’d thought it over. “You go ahead,” I said. “Tell them I’m coming right away … Soon as I put my pants on …”

“But it’s terribly urgent!” the voice cried … “She’s unconscious, I tell you! … She seems to have broken a bone in her head! … She fell down the stairs! … down to the bottom of her vault!”

“That’ll do!” I said to myself when I heard that lovely story. No need to think any longer. I beat it straight to the station. I knew all I wanted to know,

I caught my train at seven-fifteen, but only by the skin of my teeth. We never did say good-bye.

24

The first thing Parapine said when he saw me was that I wasn't looking well.

"You must have worn yourself to a frazzle in Toulouse," he said, suspicious as usual. It's true that I'd had a scare down there in Toulouse, but nothing to complain about, since I'd managed to keep clear of serious trouble, or so I thought, by slipping away at the critical moment.

I told Parapine the story in detail and aired my suspicions as well. He wasn't convinced that I'd been very bright, but we didn't have time to go into it very thoroughly, because by then the question of a job for me had become so urgent that I had to do something about it. There was no time to be lost in discussion … I had only a hundred and fifty francs left to my name and no idea where to turn … The Tarapout? … They weren't hiring anymore … the Depression. Back to La Garenne-Rancy? Try and retrieve my practice? I considered it for a while in spite of everything, but only as a last resource and very reluctantly. Nothing is quenched so easily as the sacred fire.

It was Parapine who finally came to the rescue. He found me a small job at the institution where he himself had been working for some months.

Their business was still pretty good. In addition to taking cretins to the movies, Parapine was in charge of the sparks. Twice a week, at scheduled hours, he unleashed magnetic storms over the heads of the melancholies assembled for that purpose in a hermetically sealed and pitch-black room. Mental gymnastics in sum, a brilliant idea emanating from Dr. Baryton, his boss. A skinflint, incidentally, this colleague of ours. He took me on at a very low salary but with a contract a mile long, full of clauses entirely to his advantage. In short, a boss.

We were hardly paid at all at that rest home, but the food wasn't at all bad and the lodging was excellent, with facilities for laying the nurses, which was tolerated and tacitly permitted. Baryton, the boss, had no objection whatever, in fact he had noticed that erotic tolerance attached the staff to the house. A wise man looks the other way. And besides, in the first place, it was no time to ask questions or make demands when he was offering me a nice little chunk of wherewithal in the nick of time. Thinking it over, I couldn't quite see why Parapine was suddenly taking such an active interest in me. His attitude weighed on my mind. To give him credit for brotherly love … would really be gilding his character … It had to be something more complicated. But you never can tell … We all ate lunch together, that was the custom, gathered around Baryton, our boss, the esteemed alienist, with his pointed beard and short beefy thighs, a nice man except for his thrift, but on that point he could be utterly revolting, all he needed was a pretext or opportunity …

He certainly gave us plenty of noodles and rasping Bordeaux. Somebody had left him a whole vineyard, so he told us. Which was our tough luck. A very inferior vintage, I assure you.

His asylum at Vigny-sur-Seine was always full. It was called a "Rest Home" in the prospectuses, because it was in the middle of a big garden, where the nuts went walking on nice days. They walked as if they had trouble keeping their heads balanced on their shoulders, they seemed in constant fear of stumbling and spilling the contents. All sorts of misshapen things, things they were dreadfully attached to, were bobbing and bumping about in there.

When the patients spoke of their mental treasures, it was always with anguished contortions or airs of protective condescension that made you think of powerful and ultrameticulous executives. Not for an empire would those lunatics have gone outside their minds. A madman's thoughts are just the usual ideas of a human being, except that they're hermetically sealed inside his head. The world never gets into his head, and that's the way he wants it. A sealed head is like a lake without an outlet, standing, stagnant. Baryton bought his noodles and vegetables wholesale in Paris. So naturally we weren't very popular with the shopkeepers of Vigny-sur-Seine. I'd go so far as to say that they detested us. Their animosity didn't spoil our appetites. At the beginning of my stay, Baryton, at the table, would distill philosophical conclusions from our disjointed remarks. But seeing that he had spent his life among lunatics and made his living by his association with them, sharing their meals, neutralizing their lunacies as best he could, nothing bored him so much as having to talk about their manias at table. "They have no place in the conversation of normal people!" he declared in peremptory self-defense. He himself observed that rule of mental hygiene strictly.

He was fond of conversation, and there was a kind of terror in the way he insisted on its being amusing, reassuring, and above all thoroughly sane. He just didn't want to think about the loonies. His feeling toward them was one of instinctive antipathy, and with that he contented himself once and for all. On the other hand, he loved hearing us talk about our travels. We couldn't tell him enough. My arrival liberated Parapine from

the need to talk. For him it was providential, for now I could entertain the boss during meals. All my peregrinations were served up, related at length, doctored of course, made suitably literary, amusing. Baryton made an enormous amount of noise with his tongue and mouth in eating. His daughter Aimee always sat at his right. Though only ten, Aimee already seemed faded. Something lifeless, an incurable grayness blunted our image of Aimee, as though unhealthy little clouds were always passing over her face.

There were moments of friction between Parapine and Baryton. But Baryton never bore anyone a grudge, as long as they laid no claim to the profits of his establishment. For many years his accounts had been the only element of the sacred in his existence. Once, in the days when Parapine still spoke to him, he had told him bluntly at table that he was lacking in Ethics. At first that remark had nettled Baryton, but then the whole thing had been smoothed over. You don't quarrel about such trifles. Listening to the story of my travels, Baryton not only relished a surge of romantic emotion but rejoiced at the money he was saving. "You're such a fine storyteller, Ferdinand, that after listening to you T don't have to visit those countries anymore!" To him no prettier compliment was conceivable. Only easily managed lunatics were admitted to his institution, never vicious, out-and-out homicidal maniacs. The place wasn't absolutely sinister. Hardly any bars and only a few isolation cells. Maybe the most worrisome case was little Aimee, his own daughter. The child wasn't regarded as a patient, but the environment haunted her. A howl or two would sometimes reach us in the dining room, but the cause of those screams was always something quite insignificant. And they never lasted long. Then occasionally a group of inmates would suddenly, for no reason at all, be shaken by a prolonged wave of frenzy in the course of their interminable wanderings between the pump, the clumps of bushes, and the begonia beds. Those incidents would be handled without great alarums and excursions by means of tepid baths and buckets of opium extract.

Now and then the lunatics would stand at the few dining hall windows that opened out on the street and terrify the neighborhood with their bellowing, but mostly they kept their horror to themselves. They took good care of their horror, defending it against our therapeutic efforts. That resistance of theirs was the spice of their lives. When I think now of all the lunatics I knew at Baryton's, I can't help suspecting that the only true manifestations of our innermost being are war and insanity, those two absolute nightmares.

Maybe what makes life so terribly fatiguing is nothing other than the enormous effort we make for twenty years, forty years, and more, to be reasonable, to avoid being simply, profoundly ourselves, that is, vile, ghastly, absurd. It's the nightmare of having to represent the halt subhuman we were fobbed off with as a small-size universal ideal, a superman from morning to night.

In our nuthouse we had patients at all prices, the most opulent living in heavily padded Louis XV rooms. Baryton paid these a daily, highly priced visit. They'd be expecting him. Now and then he'd be welcomed with a titanic, truly magnificent, and long-premeditated sock in the jaw. which he'd enter on the bill under "special treatment." At table Parapine maintained an attitude of reserve. Not that he was the least bit put out by my oratorical triumphs; quite the contrary, he seemed less preoccupied than in times past, in his microbe days, and all in all, almost happy. Don't forget that he'd had a bad scare over his business with the minor maidens. It had left him rather disconcerted in his dealings with the sex. In his free time, he'd wander around the grounds of our institution just like a patient. He'd smile at me when I passed, but his smiles were so vague, so pale, you'd have thought he was bidding me good-bye.

By taking us on as technical aides, Baryton had made a good bargain, for in addition to our unflagging devotion, we brought him entertainment and the echoes of adventure, for which deprivation had left him with such a craving. And indeed, he often took pleasure in expressing his satisfaction with us. Yet on Parapine's score he had certain reservations. He had never felt entirely comfortable with Parapine. "Parapine, you see, Ferdinand," he confided in me one day, "Parapine is a Russian." To Baryton the fact of his being Russian was as descriptive, morphological, and irreparable as "diabetic" or "nigger." Launched on a topic that had been tormenting him for months, he set his brain to working enormously in my presence and for my special benefit … You wouldn't have recognized the old Baryton. We were on our way to the local tobacco store for cigarettes.

"Parapine, you see, Ferdinand, of course he's intelligent … but really, you know, there's something dreadfully arbitrary about his intelligence! Don't you agree, Ferdinand? In the first place, he simply refuses to adapt … You can see that at a glance … And he's not at ease in his work … For that matter, he's not at ease in the world … Admit it! … And there he's making a mistake! A big mistake! … Because it makes him unhappy! … That proves it. Take me, Ferdinand, think how adaptable I am! …" (He thumped his sternum.)

"Suppose, for instance, the earth starts turning the wrong way tomorrow. What will I do?

Well, Ferdinand, I'll adapt! Instantly! And do you know how, Ferdinand? I'll just sleep twelve hours more, that'll turn the trick! One two three! It's as simple as that! I'll have adapted! Whereas your Parapine, you

know what he'd do in such a situation? He'd ruminate projects and grudges for another hundred years! … I'm certain! … I assure you! … Don't you agree? … If the earth starts going backward, he won't be able to sleep! … He'll see some sort of special injustice in it! … Injustice, injustice! That's his bug! … He was always talking about injustice in the days when he still deigned to speak to me … And do you think he'll content himself with sniveling? Which wouldn't be so bad! … Oh no! Before you know it he'll start looking for a way to blow up the planet! To get even, Ferdinand! And the worst of it, I'll tell you the worst of it, Ferdinand! … But just between you and me … Well, the worst of it is that he will find a way! That's right! Look here, Ferdinand, I'm going to tell you something. Try to imprint it on your mind! … There are simple lunatics and there are others, tortured by an obsession with civilization … It grieves me to think that Parapine belongs to the latter class! … Do you know what he said to me the other day? …"

"No, sir …"

"Well, here's what he said: 'Between the penis and mathematics, Monsieur Baryton, there's nothing! A vacuum!' And another thing! … Do you know what he's waiting for before starting to speak to me again?"

"No, Monsieur Baryton, I have no idea …"

"He hasn't told you?"

"No, not yet …"

"Well, he has told me … He's waiting for the dawn of the mathematical age! Neither more nor less! His mind is made up! What do you think of such impertinence? To me! His senior! His chief!"

Of course I had to laugh a little, to join him in laughing off this extravagant fancy. But Baryton was no longer dwelling on such trifles. He had bigger and better things to get indignant about.

"Ah, Ferdinand! I see this kind of thing strikes you as innocuous. Innocent words … just one more case of idle foolishness … That's what you seem to think … Just that! Am I right? Oh, thoughtless Ferdinand! Let me take pains to put you on your guard against such aberrations, which only appear to be trivial! You are absolutely mistaken! Absolutely! … A thousand times mistaken! … You will believe me, I trust, when I tell you that in the course of my career I have heard, here and elsewhere, just about everything that can be heard in the way of hot and cold delirium! Nothing has been lacking … You'll give me credit for that, won't you Ferdinand? And you have surely observed, Ferdinand, that I am not given to anxiety … to exaggeration … Not at all … A word or group of words carries very little weight with me! And the same goes for sentences and whole speeches! … Though a simple man by birth and nature, I am, and no one will deny it, one of those amply inhibited persons who are not frightened by words! … Well, Ferdinand, conscientious analysis has obliged me to conclude that I must be on my guard against Parapine! And formulate the most express reservations … His variety of extravagance resembles none of the common, inoffensive varieties … It is, I believe, one of the few dangerous forms of eccentricity, a highly contagious mania, to be precise, of the rampant social variety! In your friend's case, we may not yet be dealing with out-and-out insanity … No … Maybe his trouble is only exaggerated conviction … But the contagious manias are well known to me! … I've known a good many sufferers from conviction mania … Of many different types … And in the last analysis, those who talk about justice seem to be the maddest of the lot! … At first, I must confess, I took a certain interest in justice fanatics … Today those particular maniacs annoy and exasperate me more than I can tell , . , Don't you feel the same way? … Human beings show a strange aptitude for transmitting this mania. It terrifies me, and we find it, mind you, in all human beings! Bear that in mind, Ferdinand, in all of them! Same as with liquor and sex … The same predisposition … The same fatality … Infinitely widespread … Are you laughing, Ferdinand? If so, you frighten me! Fragile! Vulnerable!

Thoughtless! Dangerous Ferdinand! When I think that I took you for a serious-minded man! Don't forget that I'm old, Ferdinand, I could afford the luxury of thumbing my nose at the future! I'd have every right to! But you?!"

As a matter of principle, in all things and for all time, I agreed with the boss. I haven't made much practical headway in the course of my harassed existence, but I had learned the essential principles of servile etiquette. Consequently, we had become good friends. I never opposed him, and I didn't eat much at the table. A pleasant sort of assistant, in sum, economical, not the least ambitious, no threat to anyone.

Vigny-sur-Seine is situated between two sluice gates, between two hillsides stripped of vegetation, a village turning suburb. Paris will swallow it up.

It loses a garden a month. On the approaches, billboards splash it with all the colors of the Russian ballet. The town clerk's daughter has learned to make cocktails. Only the streetcar seems intent on becoming historical;

nothing short of a revolution will make it give up. The people are anxious, the children no longer have the same accent as their parents. It embarrasses the inhabitants to think that they're still attached to the Seine-et-Oise

Department. Miracles are under way. The last garden globe vanished when Laval became premier, the local cleaning women have just raised their prices by twenty centimes an hour. A bookmaker has been sighted. The postmistress buys pederastic novels and imagines others that are even more realistic. The priest says "shit" at the drop of a hat and gives stock market tips to his parishioners when they are very very good. The Seine has killed its fish and is becoming Americanized between files of pusher-puller-selfloading barges that look like ghastly sets of rotten tin false teeth along both banks. Three developers have just gone to jail. Progress sweeps on!

The real-estate situation has not escaped Baryton. He bitterly regrets not having had the foresight to buy up lots in the next valley twenty years ago, when the owners were begging you to take them away, like rotten fruit, at twenty centimes a square meter. The good old days. Luckily his Psychotherapeutic Institute was holding its own very nicely. Nevertheless there were problems. Those insatiable families were always demanding, always insisting on newer and newer methods of treatment, more electrical, more mysterious, more everything… . The most recent, most impressive machines and contraptions. And he had to submit, on pain of being outdone by his competitors … those similar institutions tucked away in the neighboring groves of Asnières, Passy, Montretout, lying in wait for the deluxe class of nuts.

Under the guidance of Parapine, Baryton did his best to modernize his establishment, as cheaply as possible to be sure, buying electrical, pneumatic, hydraulic devices, second hand, at a discount, at clearance sales, but indefatigably, so as to seem at all times better equipped than before and so appeal to the manias of his captious, well-to-do inmates. Many a moan was wrung from him by the necessity of acquiring useless equipment … of currying favor with the very lunatics.

"I opened my institution," he confided in me one day in an outpouring of sorrow, "just before the Exposition, the big one, Ferdinand … we alienists in those days were, or, if you will, constituted a very small group, much less curious, I can assure you, and less depraved than today! … None of us in those days tried to be as crazy as his patients … It was not yet the fashion for the healer to go off his rocker on the pretext that it furthered the cure, an obscene fashion, mind you, like almost everything that comes to us from foreign countries …

"You see, Ferdinand, in the days of my beginnings, French medical men still had selfrespect. They didn't feel obliged to rave along with their patients … In the interest of harmony? … Don't ask me! To make them happy? Where will it lead us? … If we persist in being more ingenious, more morbid, more perverse than the most persecuted lunatic in our asylums, in wallowing with some sort of obscene pride in every form of dementia paraded before our eyes, what will become of us? … Do you feel able, Ferdinand, to reassure me about the future of human reason? Or even of plain common sense? … At this rate what will be left of plain common sense in a few years? Nothing. I foresee it. Absolutely nothing! I can predict it … It's obvious …

"For one thing, Ferdinand, from the standpoint of a truly modern intelligence, haven't all differences and distinctions been effaced? No more white! No more black! Everything dissolves. That's the new approach! The fashion! If that's the case, why not go mad ourselves? … Right this minute! As a starter! And brag about it! Proclaim total psychic chaos! And advertise it with our own madness! Who's going to stop us? I ask you, Ferdinand! … What last superfluous human scruples? … What flabby misgivings?

Well? … Sometimes, Ferdinand, when I listen to certain of our colleagues, and, mind you, among the most esteemed, the most sought-after by the clientele and the academies alike, I wonder where they're leading us! It's infernal! Those madmen disconcert, terrify, diabolize, and above all disgust me! Just hearing them at one of their modern congresses report on the results of their habitual researches, I'm seized with livid panic, Ferdinand! I listen and my reason deserts me! Diabolical, prurient, captious, and dishonest, these minions of modern psychiatry are hurling us into the abyss with their superconscious analyses … I say it again, into the abyss. One fine morning, Ferdinand, unless you younger men do something about it, that's where we'll end up! What with stretching ourselves thin, with sublimating ourselves and torturing our minds, we'll end up on the far side of intelligence, the infernal side, that there's no coming back from! … And the fact is, what with masturbating their intelligence day and night, those ultrasuper wise men seem even now to have shut themselves up in the dungeons of the damned!

"I say day and night, because you know, Ferdinand, they fornicate themselves all night in their dreams … Need I say more! … They dig at their minds! They dilate them! They tyrannize them! … All around them there's nothing left but a foul slumgullion of organic debris, a marmalade of madness and symptoms that drip and ooze from every part of them … The remains of the mind are all over our hands, and there we are, sticky, grotesque, contemptuous, fetid. Everything's going to collapse, Ferdinand, everything is collapsing, I, old man

Baryton, am telling you, and it won't be long now! … You'll see the end, Ferdinand, the great debacle! Because you're still young! You'll see it! Oh, you'll enjoy it, I can promise you! … You'll all end up in the nuthouse! *Zoom!* Just one more outburst of madness! One too many! And *wham!* off you go to the loony bin! At last! You'll be liberated, as you put it. It has tempted you too much and too long! That will be the act of daring you've been clamoring for! But once you're in the nuthouse, my little friends … take it from me, you'll stay there!

"Make a note of this, Ferdinand, the beginning and end of all things is the lack of moderation! Want me to tell you how the big débâcle started? … It started when men played fast and loose with their sense of proportion! With foreign exaggerations! When moderation's gone, power goes with it! It was inevitable! Is then everyone doomed? Why not? All of us? Definitely! Going to the dogs? No, running! A mad stampede!

I saw the human mind, Ferdinand, losing its balance little by little and dissolving in the vast maelstrom of apocalyptic ambitions! It began about 1900 … mark that date! From then on, the world in general and psychiatry in particular have been one frantic race to see who could become more perverse, more salacious, more outlandish, more revolting, more creative as they call it, than his neighbor … A pretty mess! … Who would be first to throw himself into the arms of the monster, the beast without heart and without restraint! … The beast will devour us all, Ferdinand, it's a certainty and a good thing too! … What is this beast? … A big head that goes where it pleases! … Even now its wars and its flaming slobber are pouring in on us from all sides! … Here and now we are in the midst of a deluge! Neither more nor less! Apparently we were bored with consciousness! Well, we won't be bored any longer! We've started buggering each other for variety's sake … And we've been going in for 'impressions' and 'intuitions' ever since … like women …

"And come to think of it, is there any need for us to weigh ourselves down with the least bit of logic? … Of course not! … Logic can only be an encumbrance to the infinitely subtle, truly progressive psychologists that our times are turning out … Don't get me wrong, I'm not saying that I look down on women, Ferdinand! Certainly not! You know that! But I don't care for their 'impressions'! I'm a testiculate animal, Ferdinand, and when I have a fact, I hang on to it for dear life … In that connection I had an interesting experience the other day … I was asked to admit a writer … He was cracked … You know what he'd been shouting for over a month? They're liquidating! … They're liquidating! …' That's what he was shouting all over the house! He was a case all right. He had crossed over to the far side of the intelligence! … His trouble was that he simply couldn't liquidate … An old stricture was poisoning him with urine, stopping up his bladder … I had to relieve him drop by drop with a catheter … it took hours … But the family insisted that the cause of it all was his genius … I tried my level best to convince them that their writer's trouble was in his bladder, they clung to their idea … that he'd blown his top in a moment of excessive genius … In the end I had to fall in with their opinion … you know what families are like … You'll never get a family to understand that a man, related to them or not, is nothing but suspended putrefaction … No family will pay bills for suspended putrefaction …" For twenty years Baryton had been wrestling with the quarrelsome vanity of families. They gave him a hard time. Patient and well balanced as I knew him to be, he nevertheless nursed a vestige of well-fermented hatred toward families … At the time when I was living close to him, he was exasperated and trying obstinately, though in secret, to free himself, to escape once and for all, one way or another, from the tyranny of those families … Everyone has his reasons for trying to escape his private unhappiness, and each of us, to that end, coaxes some ingenious method from the circumstances. Blessed are those who can content themselves with whorehouses!

Parapine, for his part, seemed happy to have chosen the way of silence. Baryton, as I came to understand only later, doubted in his heart whether he would ever succeed in freeing himself from families, from their hold on him, from the thousand repulsive servitudes involved in alimentary psychiatry, in short, from his condition. He so longed for something new and absolutely different that he was thoroughly ripe for flight and escape. This accounted no doubt for his critical tirades… . Routine was death to his ego. Sublimation was no longer possible, he just wanted to go away, to take his body somewhere else. There was nothing of the musician in Baryton, and in the end he had to upset everything like a bear.

He, who thought himself so reasonable, set himself free by means of a scandalous and thoroughly regrettable action. Later on, at leisure, I shall try to tell what happened. For the moment the job of assistant to Baryton struck me as quite bearable. The therapeutic routine was far from strenuous, though now and then, as you'd expect, I'd feel pretty sick after talking too long with one of the patients, a kind of dizzy spell would come over me, as though the patients, from one commonplace little remark to another, had, without seeming to, led me away from my usual dwelling place to the heart and center of their dementia. For a short moment I wondered how I would ever get out of there and whether I hadn't, unsuspecting, been locked up with them in their madness once and for all. Because I was always kind to the inmates, which was my nature, I lived on the dangerous rim of madness, on the brink, so to speak. I didn't go under, but I felt in constant danger, as if they had lured me by stealth into their unknown city. A city whose streets became softer and softer as you

penetrated further between its slobbery houses, with their melting, illclosed windows and their dubious sounds. The doors and the ground are unstable, shifting … And yet something makes you want to go further, to see if you'll have the strength to retrieve your reason from the wreckage. Reason can easily become an obsession, as good humor and sleep are for neurasthenics. All you can think of is your reason. Everything's out of kilter. It's no joke.

So I was worrying along from doubt to doubt when the fourth of May came up. A big day. I was feeling wonderfully well that day. Pulse 78. Like after a good lunch. Then suddenly the world began to spin. I held tight. Everything turns to bile. People start looking weird. As if they'd gone sour like lemons and more malignant than ever before. From climbing too high, no doubt, to the very peak of health, I had fallen in front of the mirror and with passionate fascination was watching myself grow old.

On rotten days like that, mountains of fatigue and disgust accumulate between your nose and your eyes, enough in that one spot to last several men for years. Much too much for one man.

Just then, all in all, I'd have been glad to go back to the Tarapout. Especially as Parapine had also stopped talking to me. But I was in their bad books at the Tarapout. It's hard to have no source of spiritual or material comfort but your boss, especially when he's an alienist and you're not so sure of your own head. All you can do is hold tight. And not say anything. We could still talk about women together. That was a benign subject, which gave me a chance to make him laugh now and then. In that field he gave me credit for a certain experience, for some slight and nasty competence.

It had its advantages that on the whole Baryton should consider me with a certain contempt. A boss always finds the crumminess of his staff rather reassuring. A slave must at all costs be slightly, if not superlatively, contemptible. An assortment of chronic moral and physical defects justifies the horrible treatment he is getting. Then the earth turns more smoothly, for each man occupies the place he deserves.

A person you make use of should be dull and abject, a born failure. It comes as a relief to the boss, especially since Baryton paid us very badly. An employer with his degree of acute avarice tends to be suspicious and uneasy. Failure, debauchee, black sheep, loyal! … Now there's a perfect combination that will justify anything. Baryton wouldn't have been displeased if I had been kind of wanted by the police. Those are the things that guarantee an employee's loyalty.

I had cast off all selfrespect long ago. That sentiment had always struck me as far above my station, much too costly for my resources. I'd made that sacrifice once and for all and had no regrets whatever.

By then I was quite content if I could keep myself in a tolerable state of alimentary and physical balance. I had stopped worrying my head about anything else. Nevertheless, I found it hard to get through certain nights, especially when the memory of what had happened in Toulouse prevented me from sleeping.

At such times I couldn't help it, I imagined all sorts of dramatic sequels to Grandma Henrouille's fall into the mummy crypt. Fear rose up from my bowels, seized hold of my heart, and made it pound so hard that I'd jump out of bed and pace the floor, this way and that way into the depths of darkness and into the dawning light. During those attacks I despaired of ever recapturing enough peace of mind to fall asleep again. If someone tells you he's unhappy, don't take it on faith. Just ask him if he can sleep … If he can, then all's well. That's good enough.

I would never again succeed in sleeping fully. I had lost, so to speak, the habit of trust, the enormous trust you need to sleep soundly among human beings. I'd have needed at least an illness, a fever, a specific catastrophe to retrieve some small part of my old indifference, neutralize my anxiety, and recapture the divine stupidity of an easy mind. The only bearable days I remember over a period of many years were a few days of heavy feverish flu. Baryton never asked me about my health. For that matter he chose to disregard his own.

"Science and life form disastrous mixtures, Ferdinand! Always avoid taking care of your health, believe me! … Every question asked of your body becomes a breach … through which anxiety, obsession, will enter …" Such were his simplist biological principles … He thought he was clever. "The known is good enough for me" was another of his frequent sayings. He was trying to impress me.

He never mentioned money to me, but in his secret heart he thought of it all the time. Though I didn't exactly understand them at the time, Robinson's dealings with the Henrouille family were on my conscience, and from time to time I tried to tell Baryton bits and pieces of the story. But it didn't interest him in the least. He preferred my stories about Africa, especially the ones relating to colleagues of ours whom I'd run across here and there and to the strange and questionable medical practices of those very freakish colleagues. At the rest home we had an alarm now and then in connection with his little girl Aimée. Suddenly at dinner time she was

nowhere to be found, neither in the garden nor in her room. I fully expected to find her dismembered body in a clump of bushes one evening. She roamed all over the place with our lunatics, so there was reason to fear the worst. And indeed she had narrowly escaped being raped quite a number of times. When that happened, there'd be no end of screams and shower baths and warnings. Time and again she'd been told to avoid certain hidden paths, but the child was irresistibly attracted to nooks and crannies. On those occasions her father never failed to give her a memorable spanking. All in vain. I think she enjoyed the excitement.

We of the staff always had to be on our guard when passing the lunatics in the corridors. Madmen are more prone to murder than ordinary people. We got into the habit of turning our backs to the wall when they passed, prepared to give them a good kick in the groin at the slightest suspicious move. Watching you out of the corners of their eyes, they pass on. Madness apart, we understood each other perfectly.

Baryton deplored the fact that none of us played chess. Just to please him, I had to take it up.

During the day he distinguished himself by an active petty chicanery that made life in his entourage extremely fatiguing. Every morning some new and abysmally practical idea would spring from his brain. One day he decided to replace our rolls of toilet paper with folded folios, and we were obliged to ponder and waste a whole week with contradictory resolutions. Finally we decided to wait for the sales at the department stores. The next futile bother had to do with flannel vests: should they be worn over or under the shirt? … And what was the proper way to administer Epsom salts? … Parapine evaded these subintellectual controversies by stubborn silence.

In the end, inspired by boredom, I told Baryton about many more adventures than my travels had ever provided. My stock was exhausted. From then on it was up to him to fill in the conversational vacuum with his niggling pros and cons. Of which there was no end. He had defeated me by exhaustion. And I had no such defense as Parapine's total indifference. In spite of myself I had to answer him. I couldn't hold myself back from bickering with him for hours on end about the relative merits of cocoa and coffee … He was bewitching me with foolishness.

We'd start in again about something or other, about elastic stockings for varicose veins, about optimum faradic currents, or the treatment of cellulitis in the region of the elbow … It got so that I'd jabber about anything under the sun in line with his tastes or recommendations, like a human talking machine … He would keep abreast or just ahead of me in those infinitely idiotic meanderings. He saturated me with conversation for all eternity. When Parapine heard us embark on quibbles as long as the noodles we were eating, he'd guffaw to himself and sputter the boss's Bordeaux all over the tablecloth. But peace to the memory of Monsieur Baryton., the bastard. In the end I got rid of him. But what genius it took!

The frothier of the female patients entrusted to my care gave me a hell of a time … When it wasn't cold showers, it was catheters … Their little vices and perversions, their big apertures that always had to be kept clean … One of our young inmates regularly earned me a reprimand from the boss … She'd wreck the garden by pulling up flowers, that was her mania, and I didn't care for the boss's observations …

"The betrothed," they called her, she was an Argentine, physically not bad at all, but as for her head, she had only one idea, she wanted to marry her father. One by one she picked all the flowers in the garden and stuck them in the big white veil that she wore day and night, wherever she went. Her family, who were religious fanatics, were dreadfully ashamed. They hid their daughter from the world and her idea with her. According to Baryton, she had succumbed to the absurdity of too strict and rigid an upbringing. The unbending morality of her parents had exploded in her head, so to speak.

At dusk we'd read the roll call at great length and send the boarders to their quarters. Then we'd make the rounds of the rooms, mostly to stop the more agitated ones from masturbating too frantically before falling asleep. You have to watch closely and keep them in check on Saturday night, because the families come visiting on Sunday and it's bad for the reputation of the establishment if they find the patients masturbated white. All that reminded me of Bébert and the antimasturbation syrup. I administered quantities of that syrup in Vigny. I had kept the formula and ended by believing in it. The concierge at the rest home kept a little candy shop with her husband, a big bruiser who was called in now and then when an inmate got violent.

And so life and the months went by, pleasantly enough all in all, and we'd have had nothing to complain about if Baryton hadn't suddenly conceived another of his big ideas. He had no doubt been wondering for quite some time if it mightn't be possible to make more and better use of me for the same money. And he finally found the answer. One day after lunch he came out with his idea. First he had them dish up a whole salad bowl full of my favorite dessert, strawberries and cream. Already my suspicions were aroused. And true enough, I had no sooner downed the last strawberry than he attacked.

“Ferdinand,” he says. “I’ve been wondering if you mightn’t consent to give my little girl Aimee a few English lessons … What do you say? … I know you have an excellent accent … And in English a good accent is what counts, don’t you think? … You see, Ferdinand, without wishing to flatter you, I know how obliging you are …” He had caught me off balance. “Why, certainly, Monsieur Baryton,” I said. It was agreed then and there that I’d give Aimee her first English lesson the very next morning. And others followed, one after another, for weeks …

Those English lessons marked the beginning of a thoroughly murky, dubious period, during which event followed event at a rhythm quite different from that of ordinary life. Baryton insisted on attending the lessons I gave his daughter, every one of them. In spite of my conscientious efforts, poor little Aimee made no headway in English, none at all. She had no interest whatever in discovering what all these new words might mean. In fact she wondered what we nasty men wanted of her that made us insist so on her remembering their meanings. She didn’t cry, but she was very close to it. She’d have been a lot happier if we had left her alone to manage what little French she already knew, the difficulties and facilities of which were quite sufficient to keep her busy all her life. But her father didn’t see it that way, not at all.

“You must grow up to be a modern young woman, my dear,” he kept insisting. That was supposed to comfort her. “I, your father, have lost a good deal by not knowing enough English to handle my foreign patients … Come come, don’t cry, my darling! … You’d do better to listen to Monsieur Bardamu, who’s so patient, so kind, and when you’re able to say ‘the’ with your tongue the way he has shown you, I’ll buy you a beautiful nickel-plated bicycle …”

But Aimée had no desire to say “the” or “enough,” none whatever … It was the boss who said “the” and “rough” in her place, and that wasn’t all he learned in spite of his Bordeaux accent and his mania for logic, which is really no help in English. This went on for a month, two months. As the father’s passion for learning English developed, Aimée had less and less need to struggle with the vowels. Baryton monopolized me. In fact he took up all my time, he never let me go, pumped all my English out of me. Since his room was next to mine, I could hear him first thing in the morning, converting his whole private life into English as he dressed. *“The coffee is black … My shirt is white … The garden is green … How are you today, Bardamu?”* he would shout through the partition. He soon acquired a taste for the most elliptical forms of the language.

With that perversion he took us a long way … Once he had made contact with great literature, there was no stopping him … After eight months of such abnormal progress, he had refashioned himself almost completely along Anglo-Saxon lines. In this way he managed to get me completely disgusted with him. Twice in a row.

Little by little we had come to leave little Aimée out of the conversation almost entirely, in other words, in peace. She was quite content to go back to her clouds. She’d never learn English, and that was that. Baryton would learn it all.

Winter returned, and with it Christmas. The travel agencies were advertising return trips to England at bargain prices … While walking on the boulevards, accompanying Parapine to the movies, I’d notice those advertisements … I even went in and asked about the prices. Then at table, in the course of the conversation, I dropped a word or two to Baryton. At first my bit of information didn’t seem to interest him. He let it pass. I thought he’d forgotten all about it, but then one evening he himself brought it up and asked me to bring him a folder when I had a chance.

Between two English literature sessions, we often played Japanese billiards or *bouchon* in one of the isolation rooms situated just above the concierge’s lodge and equipped with good iron bars.

Baryton excelled in games of skill. Parapine regularly challenged him to play for drinks and as regularly lost. We spent whole evenings in that improvised little game room, especially in the winter when it was raining, so as not to mess up the chief’s big drawing rooms. Sometimes an excitable patient would be put in the same little room for observation, but not very often.

While Parapine and the boss were matching their skills at bouchon on the carpet or on the floor, I would amuse myself, if you want to call it that, trying to experience the same sensations as a prisoner in his cell. That was one sensation I had never known. If you really want to, you can work up friendly feelings toward the few people who pass through those suburban streets. At the end of the day, your heart goes out to the bit of movement created by the streetcars, bringing back docile clusters of office workers from Paris. Their débâcle ends at the first bend in the street, right after the grocery store. Then they flow quietly into the darkness. You’ve barely had time to count them. But Baryton seldom let me daydream at my leisure. In the middle of his game of *bouchon*, he’d come to life with some ridiculous question.

“How do you say ‘impossible’ in English, Ferdinand?”

When it came to improving his English, he was insatiable. With every ounce of his native imbecility he aspired to perfection. No approximations or concessions for him. But then luckily events took a turn which brought me deliverance.

In the course of our readings in the history of England, I saw that he was losing some of his assurance and even the greater part of his optimism. As we were feeling our way into the Elizabethan poets, his mind and personality underwent great though imponderable changes. At first I found it hard to believe, but in the end I, like everyone else, was obliged to see Baryton as he had become, in truth a pitiful spectacle. His mind, formerly razoredged to the point of severity, had begun to wander, leading him into incredible, interminable digressions. Little by little, he developed the habit of daydreaming for hours on end, he'd be right there in his Institute, before our very eyes, and his thoughts would be off in the distance … Though he had long and decisively repelled me, I felt a certain remorse at seeing him go to pieces like that. I felt partly responsible for his decline … I felt that his spiritual confusion had something to do with me … So much so that one day I suggested interrupting our study of literature, on the pretext that a break would give us time and leisure to renew our documentary sources … He wasn't fooled by my feeble ruse. His response was a friendly but categorical refusal … He was determined to carry on with the discovery of spiritual England under my guidance … Just as he had begun … What could I say? … I acquiesced. He was afraid the hours of life remaining to him might not suffice for complete success … In short, though I feared the worst, I was obliged to pursue our dismal academic peregrination to the best of my ability.

The fact is that Baryton was no longer himself. The persons and things around us became fantasmagoric and slow, losing their importance and even the colors they had formerly worn for us, and taking on a dreamlike, ambivalent softness …

Baryton had come to concern himself only occasionally and more and more languidly with the administrative details of his own establishment, though it was his life work and for over thirty years the object of his literally passionate interest. He now relied entirely on Parapine to manage the administrative end. The increasing confusion of his mind, which he still tried to conceal in public, soon became obvious to us, a physical reality. One day Gustave Mandamour, a policeman we knew in Vigny because we sometimes employed him for certain heavy work, and undoubtedly the least discerning person I have ever come across though I've known many of his kind, asked me if the boss hadn't received some terrible news … I did my best to reassure him, but without conviction. Baryton had lost his interest in gossip and chitchat, All he wanted was not to be disturbed on any pretext whatever … At the very beginning of our studies we had perused, too quickly to his way of thinking, Macaulay's compendious *History of England*, a seminal work in sixteen volumes. At his command and under quite alarming conditions, we went back to it. Chapter by chapter.

It seemed to me that Baryton was more and more dangerously contaminated by meditation. When we came to that merciless passage where the Pretender Monmouth disembarks on the blurred shores of Kent … Where his venture starts revolving around itself … Where Monmouth the Pretender no longer knows exactly what he's pretending to … Or what he wants to do … Or what he has come here for … Where he starts telling himself that he'd be glad to beat it … but he doesn't know where to or how … when defeat rises up before him … in the pale dawn … When the sea carries his last ships away … When for the first time Monmouth starts thinking … then likewise the lowly Baryton couldn't get to the end of his own decisions … He read and reread that passage and mumbled it over again … Overwhelmed, he closed the book and came over and lay down beside us. For a long time, with half-closed eyes, he ran through the whole text from memory, and then in his English accent, the best among the Bordeaux accents I had given him to choose from, he recited it again …

Face to face with Monmouth's adventure, where all the pitiful absurdity of our puerile and tragic nature discloses itself in the mirror of Eternity, Baryton was seized with vertigo. Only the merest thread had attached him to our common lot, and now that thread snapped … From that moment on, I can say without exaggerating, he ceased to be one of us … He'd had it …

Late that night he asked me to join him in his directorial office … At that point I expected him to communicate some monumental decision, my immediate dismissal, for instance … Not at all … On the contrary, the decision he had arrived at was entirely favorable to me. Believe it or not, I was so unaccustomed to being surprised by good news that a tear or two escaped me … Baryton chose to interpret my emotion as sadness. That reversed the roles, and he began to comfort me …

"Will you doubt my word, Ferdinand, if I assure you that it took far more than courage on my part to resolve to leave this Institute? … I, whose sedentary habits are known to you. I, a man on the brink of old age, whose whole career has consisted of long, tenacious, scrupulous verification of innumerable slow or sudden inspirations? … In the space of a very few months, I have come to abjure all that … It seems hardly believable … Yet here I am, body and soul, in such a state of detachment, of exultation … Ferdinand! *Hurrah*, as you say in English! My past has ceased to exist! I shall be reborn, Ferdinand! Neither more nor less! I am going away!

Oh, kind friend, your tears are powerless to attenuate the definitive disgust I feel for everything that has kept me here for so many lackluster years … Enough! I can bear it no longer! I repeat, I am going away! Fleeing! Escaping!

True, I am torn! I know it! I bleed! I can see it! And yet, Ferdinand, not for anything in the world, do you hear me, Ferdinand? Not for anything would I turn back! … Even if I had dropped an eye somewhere in this muck, I would not come back to pick it up! That's the long and the short of it! Do you doubt my sincerity now?"

I doubted nothing whatsoever. Baryton was unquestionably capable of anything. Besides, I am sure that in the state he had worked himself up into, any contradiction on my part would have been fatal to his reason. I left him alone for a little while. But then, on second thought, I tried to influence him just a little, risked a last attempt to bring him back to us … by means of a slightly transposed, amiably oblique … argument …

"I beg you, Ferdinand, abandon all hope of my going back on my decision! It is irrevocable, I tell you! You will give me no end of pleasure by never speaking of it again … For the last time, Ferdinand, do you wish to please me? At my age, I know, a sense of mission is most unusual … That's a fact … But when it comes, it's irremediable …"

Those were his very words, almost the last he uttered. I cite them verbatim.

"Perhaps, my dear Monsieur Baryton," I nevertheless ventured to break in. "Perhaps in the end this sort of impromptu holiday you are preparing to take will be nothing more than a rather romantic episode, a welcome diversion, a happy intermezzo in the course of your undoubtedly somewhat austere professional activity … perhaps after tasting a different life … more varied, less banally methodic than the life we lead here, then perhaps you will simply come back to us, pleased with your journey, surfeited with the unforeseen … And then, quite naturally, you will resume your place at our head … proud of your recent acquisitions … refreshed in a word, and henceforth, no doubt, prepared to accept, to look with indulgence upon the daily monotony of our laborious routine … An older and a wiser man! If you'll forgive me, Monsieur Baryton, for putting it that way …"

"Oh Ferdinand, you flatterer! … Somehow you still manage to touch my masculine pride, which, I discover, remains sensitive, exigent in fact, despite all my weariness and past trials … No, Ferdinand! With all your ingenuity you cannot in one moment make the abominably hostile and painful essence of our whole striving look benign to me. And moreover, Ferdinand, the time for hesitation is past, it is too late to turn back! … I have been drained, I admit it, I shout it from the rooftops, Ferdinand: drained! stultified! defeated! by forty years of prudent paltriness! … That is far too much! What I aim to do? You want to know? … No reason why I shouldn't tell you, you, my last friend, you who have been willing to take a disinterested part in the sufferings of a defeated old man … What I want, Ferdinand, is to try and lose my soul, as you might try to lose a mangy dog, your stinking dog, the companion who disgusts you, and to get far away from him before you die … To be alone at last … At peace … Myself …"

"But, my dear Monsieur Baryton, I have never, in any of your words, caught an inkling of the violent despair whose uncompromising demands you have suddenly revealed to me. I am amazed! On the contrary, your daily remarks still strike me as perfectly pertinent … All your spirited, fruitful suggestions … Your splendidly judicious and methodical medical treatments … I would search your daily actions in vain for any sign of depression, of defeat … Really and truly, I discern nothing of the kind …" But for the first time since I'd known him, Baryton derived no pleasure from my compliments. He went so far as to dissuade me, quite amiably, from pursuing the conversation in a laudatory vein.

"No, my dear Ferdinand, I assure you … True, your last professions of friendship have given my last moments here an unhoped-for sweetness, and yet with all your kindness you cannot reconcile me to the memory of a past which overwhelms me and which this place stinks of … At any cost and, do you hear? under any conditions, I am determined to go away …"

"But Monsieur Baryton, this institution, what will we do with it? Have you thought of that?"

"Yes, of course I've thought of it, Ferdinand … You will take over the management for as long as I'm away, that's all! … Haven't you always had excellent relations with our clientele? They will gladly accept you as director … Everything will be splendid, you'll see, Ferdinand … Parapine, since he can't abide conversation, will take care of the mechanical end, the apparatus, the laboratory … He has a way with those things … So everything's in the best of order … And you know, I've stopped believing that anyone's presence is indispensable … Even on that score, you see, my friend, I've changed considerably …" True enough, he was unrecognizable.

“But aren’t you afraid, Monsieur Baryton, that your departure will provoke malicious comments on the part of your competitors in the region? … In Passy, for instance? In Montretout? … In Gargan-Livry? All those people around us … Always keeping an eye on us! … Those indefatigably treacherous colleagues! … What construction will they put on your noble voluntary exile? … What will they call it? An escapade? How do I know?

Mischief? Flight? Bankruptcy? …

That eventuality had no doubt given him occasion for long and painful reflections. It still troubled him, and he turned pale before my eyes at the thought of it … His daughter, Aimée, our little halfwit, was in for a pretty rough time. He was entrusting her to the care of an aunt in the provinces, a total stranger if the truth be known. So, once his private affairs had been settled, Parapine and I would only have to look after his interests and property as best we could. Adrift in a ship without a captain!

After all he had told me, I thought it permissible to ask him which way he was heading in his quest for adventure …

“To England, Ferdinand!” he replied, without batting an eyelash. So much had happened to us in so short a time, I thought we’d have trouble digesting it, but it was clear that we’d have to adapt quickly to our new mode of life. The very next day Parapine and I helped him with his luggage. The passport with all its little pages and visas startled him somewhat. He had never seen a passport before. But while he was at it, he’d have liked to apply for a few spares. We managed to convince him that this was impossible.

One last time he stumbled over the question: should he take hard collars or soft collars away with him and how many of each? This problem, still undecided, brought us almost to train time. All three of us jumped into the last streetcar for Paris. Baryton took only a small suitcase, intending to travel light and preserve his mobility wherever he went. On the platform he was impressed by the noble elevation of the car steps on the international trains. Hesitating to mount those majestic structures, he contemplated the car as though gazing at a monument. We helped him a little. Having taken a second-class ticket, he made a comparative, practical, and cheerful observation: “First is no better,” he said. We shook hands with him. The time was at hand. The whistle blew, and the train pulled out on the dot with an enormous jolt and crashing of steel, abominably mutilating our farewells. He had barely time to say: “Good-bye, boys!” and his hand broke loose, carried away from ours …

Then his hand was waving in the smoke, rushing through the noise, already in darkness, further and further down the rails, white …

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In a way we weren't sorry to see him go, but all the same the house seemed very empty without him.

In the first place, the way he'd gone made us sad, in spite of ourselves so to speak. It wasn't natural. After such a blow we wondered what might happen to us.

But we didn't have time to wonder very long. Only a few days after we'd taken Baryton to the station, I'm informed that there's someone asking to see me personally in the office. Abbé Protiste.

So I tell him the news, and what news! Especially the way Baryton had run out on us to go gallivanting around in the septentrional regions … When Protiste heard that, he couldn't get over it, and when it finally sank in, the altered situation meant only one thing to him, namely, the advantage I could derive from it. "Such trust on the part of your director," he kept saying over and over, "strikes me as the most flattering sort of promotion, my dear doctor."

I tried to calm him down, but once launched he persisted in his view of the matter and predicted that the most glorious of futures lay in wait for me, a magnificent medical career, as he put it. I couldn't stop him.

Nevertheless, though with considerable difficulty, we finally got back to serious matters, that is, to the city of Toulouse, whence he had arrived only the day before. Of course I gave him his turn to speak and tell me all he knew. I even pretended to be astonished, nay, stupefied, when he told me about the old woman's accident.

"What?! What's that?!" I interrupted. "Dead? Heavens above! When did this happen?" Little by little, he had to come clean.

Without telling me in so many words who had pushed the old woman down her little staircase, he said nothing to deter me from guessing … It seems she hadn't had time to say boo.

We understood each other … It was a good job, handled with care. This time he had done for her … He hadn't botched his second try.

Luckily everyone in the neighborhood had thought Robinson was still stone-blind. So they hadn't suspected anything more than an accident, a very tragic one to be sure, but quite understandable when you thought it over, given the circumstances, the old woman's age and the time of day, the late afternoon when she must have been tired … Just then I had no desire to hear more. He had told me plenty.

But it wasn't so easy getting the Abbé to change the subject. The thing was on his mind. He kept coming back to it, apparently in the hope that I'd make some kind of slip and give myself away … Nothing doing! He could keep trying … So after a while he gave up and contented himself with talking about Robinson and his health … His eyes … In that department he was much better … But his morale was still low. In fact his morale was terrible! In spite of the kindness and affection the two women never stopped showing him … he never stopped complaining about his own hard lot and life in general. It didn't surprise me to hear Protiste telling me all that. I knew Robinson. He had a lowdown, ungrateful nature. But I distrusted the Abbé even more … I didn't say a word while he was talking to me. All his confiding didn't get him anywhere.

"I must admit, doctor, that your friend, in spite of a material life that has become pleasant and easy and the prospect of a happy marriage, has disappointed all our hopes … Once again he is succumbing to the same fatal penchant for escapades, the perverse impulses you detected in the past? … What do you think of those tendencies of his, my dear doctor?" In short, if I got the drift, Robinson's only thought was to drop everything. At first his fiancee and her mother were angry, then they were stricken with grief. That's what Abbé

Protiste had come to tell me. All this was rather upsetting, and for my part I made up my mind to hold my tongue and steer clear of these people's little family affairs at all costs … After an abortive interview we parted at the streetcar stop, rather coolly to tell the truth. Not at all easy in my mind, I went back to the rest home.

Only a short time after this visit, we had our first news of Baryton. From England. A few postcards. He wished us all "good health and good luck." After that a few vapid lines from one place and another. A card with no message on it informed us that he had gone to Norway, and a few weeks later there was a somewhat reassuring telegram: "Good crossing!" From Copenhagen.

As we had foreseen, the chief's absence provoked the most vicious comment in Vigny and environs. It seemed best for the future of the Institute that we should provide the patients and our colleagues round about with

only the barest minimum of information regarding the reasons for this absence.

Months passed, months of extreme caution, dull and silent. Among ourselves we stopped mentioning Baryton altogether. To tell the truth, thinking about him made us feel rather ashamed.

And then it was summer again. We couldn't spend all our time in the garden supervising the patients. To prove to ourselves that we had some freedom in spite of it all, we ventured as far as the banks of the Seine, just to get out.

After the embankment on the far shore, the great plain of Gennevilliers begins, a beautiful expanse of gray and white, with chimneys softly outlined in the dust and mist. Right beside the towpath you'll see the bargemen's bistrot. It guards the entrance to the canal. The yellow current comes pushing against the lock.

For hours on end we'd look down at all that, and off to the side at the long swamp, the insidious smell of which reaches as far as the motor road. You get used to it. That muck was so old, so worn out by the river floods that it had no color left. Sometimes on summer evenings when the sky went pink and sentimental the mud would take on a kind of gentle look. It was there on the bridge that we'd listen to the accordion music they'd play on the barges while waiting at the lock gates for the night to be over so they could pass through to the river. Especially the ones coming down from Belgium are musical, they have color all over, green and yellow, and clotheslines full of shirts and drawers and raspberry-colored slips, puffed up by the wind as it leaps and gusts into them.

I'd often go to the bargemen's bar at the slack houf after lunch, when the owner's cat is blissfully at peace within four walls, shut up in a little blue-enamel heaven that belongs to him alone.

There I too sat drowsing in the early afternoon, forgotten, I thought, by all the world, waiting for the time to pass.

I saw someone coming in the distance, coming up the road. I wasn't long in doubt. He had hardly set foot on the bridge when I recognized him. It was Robinson, his very own self. No possible doubt. "He's come looking for me," I said to myself … "The priest must have given him my address! … I'll have to get rid of him quick!" At that particular moment I thought it was foul of him to come around bothering me just as I was starting to build up a cosy bit of self-indulgence. We're always suspicious of things approaching on a road, and we're right. By then he had almost reached the bistrot. I went outside. He seemed surprised to see me. "Where in hell have you come from?" I ask him, not at all friendly. "From La Garenne …" he says. "Okay. Have you eaten?" He didn't look as if he'd eaten, but he didn't want to seem to be starving the moment he got there. "So you're on the loose again?" I ask him. Because, believe me, I wasn't at all glad to be seeing him again. It didn't suit me one bit.

Just then Parapine came up from the canal, looking for me. That was a good thing. Parapine was tired from being on duty so often at the asylum. It was true that I'd been taking my responsibilities rather lightly. Be that as it may, we'd both have given a good deal to know exactly when Baryton would be coming back. We hoped he'd stop gadding about pretty soon so he could relieve us of the business and start looking after it himself. It was too much for us. Neither of us was ambitious, and we didn't give a good goddamn about the prospects for the future. Which was wrong of us, I admit.

I have to give Parapine credit, he never asked questions about the financial management of the institution or my dealings with the clientele, but I filled him in just the same, in spite of him so to speak, and when that happened it was like talking to myself. About Robinson now, it was important to put him in the picture.

"I told you about Robinson, remember?" I asked him by way of introduction. "You know. My war buddy."

He'd heard me tell my war stories and stories about Africa a hundred times and in a hundred different ways. That was my style.

"Well," I went on, "This is Robinson in the flesh, come all the way from Toulouse to see us … We're all having dinner together at the house." To tell the truth, I felt kind of uneasy about inviting him in the name of the Institute. It was a sort of indiscretion. The situation called for a winning, ingratiating air of authority, something I didn't have at all. Besides, Robinson wasn't making things any easier for me. On our way back to the village he seemed curious and anxious, especially in regard to Parapine, whose long, pale face intrigued him. At first he thought Parapine was one of the lunatics. As soon as he found out where we were staying in Vigny, he began to see lunatics everywhere. I reassured him.

"What about you?" I asked him. "Have you found some sort of work at least, now that you're back?"

“I’m going to start looking” was all the answer I got.

“How about your eyes? Cured? You can see now?”

“Yes, I can see. Almost as good as before.”

“Then you must be happy,” I said.

No, he wasn’t happy. He had other things to do beside being happy. I was careful not to mention Madelon right away. That was still a ticklish subject between us. We spent quite some time over our *apéritifs*, and I took the opportunity to tell him a good deal about the rest home and various other things. I’ve never been able to stop shooting my mouth off right and left, pretty much like Baryton, come to think of it. Our dinner went off cordially. And when it was over I couldn’t very well put Robinson out in the street. I decided that for the present we’d set up a folding bed for him in the dining room. Parapine as usual expressed no opinion. “All right, Léon,” I said. “You can stay here until you find a job …”

“Thanks,” he said simply. And every morning from then on he took the streetcar in to Paris, to look for a job as a salesman.

He was “sick of factories,” he said, he wanted to be a salesman. I’ve got to be fair, he may have knocked himself out looking for a salesman’s job, but he certainly didn’t find one. One day he came back from Paris earlier than usual. I was still in the garden, supervising my charges near the big pond. He came out and joined me. There was something on his mind.

“Listen!” he began.

“I’m listening.”

“Couldn’t you give me some little job right here? … I can’t find one anywhere else …”

“Have you really tried?”

“Yes, I’ve really tried …”

“You want a job here in the nuthouse? Doing what? Can’t you find some little thing in Paris? Would you like Parapine and me to ask some people we know?” My offer to help him find a job wasn’t to his liking.

“It’s not that there’s absolutely no jobs to be had,” he said. “Maybe I’d find one … some little job … Sure … But don’t you see … I absolutely have to make it look like I’m off my rocker … It’s urgent, it’s indispensable! It’s gotta look like I’m off my rocker …”

“All right, ” I said. “Say no more!”

“Don’t try to shut me up, Ferdinand. I’ve got to say more,” he insisted, “because I want you to understand. And as I know you, it takes you a long time to understand anything and decide to do something about it.”

“In that case, shoot,” I said. “Tell me all about it.” I was resigned.

“If I don’t make it look like I’m nuts, I’ll be out of luck, I assure you … Big trouble! … She’s perfectly capable of having me arrested … Now do you get the drift?”

“Madelon, you mean?”

“Madelon! Who else?”

“That’s great!”

“You can say that again …”

“So you’re really on the outs?”

“As you see …”

“Come this way if you want to tell me more,” I interrupted and led him off to one side. “It’s safer because of the nuts … Mad as they are, they understand certain things that’ll sound even wilder when they repeat them …”

We went up to one of the isolation rooms, and once there it didn't take him long to reconstitute the whole machination, especially as I already knew that he'd stop at nothing, and Abbé Protiste had hinted at the rest …

He hadn't bungled his second try. No one could accuse him of goofing again. Not by a long shot!

"You see, the old bag was getting on my nerves more and more … Especially after my eyes got a little better and I could go out in the street by myself … After that I could see things … I could see the old bag too … I could see her all right, in fact I never saw anything else! … All day long I had her there in front of me! … She was poisoning my life! … I honestly think she hung around on purpose … to bug me … I can't explain it any other way … And that house we were all living in, you know the house, it's a hard place to keep from fighting in … You saw how small it is! … We were all on top of each other! … You can't say different!"

"And the cellar stairs weren't very solid, were they?"

I myself had noticed how dangerous those stairs were, when I visited the crypt for the first time with Madelon. They'd been shaky even then.

"Yes, it was practically a setup," he admitted very frankly.

"And what about the people down there?" I asked him. "The neighbors, the priests, the reporters … Didn't their tongues wag some when it happened? …"

"No, it seems they didn't … Besides, they didn't think I was up to it … They thought I was a washout … Blind … You understand …"

"Well, you can thank your stars for that, because otherwise … But what about Madelon? … Was she in it with you?"

"Not exactly … But just a little, yes, of course, because we were supposed to inherit the whole crypt once the old bag passed on … Things had been settled that way … The two of us were going to take over …"

"So what went wrong between you?"

"Well, that's hard to explain …"

"Was she sick of you?"

"Not at all, she was crazy about me and still dead set on getting married … Her mother was all for it too, more than ever. She wanted us to do it quick because we had come into the old bag's mummies and there'd be enough for the three of us to live on and then some …"

"So what went wrong between you?"

"Well, I just wanted them to leave me in peace! It's as simple as that! The mother, the daughter, both of them …"

"Look here, Léon!" I stopped him when I heard that. "Listen to me! … Your story doesn't make sense! … Think of Madelon and her mother, put yourself in their place … How would you feel in their place? … I ask you … When you got there, you hardly had a pair of shoes to your name, no job, nothing, all day long you complained, about the old woman keeping all the money, and so forth and so on … She passes on, or rather, you pass her on … And right away you start making faces again and putting on airs … Put yourself in the place of those two women, stop and think … It's unbearable!

Boy, would I have told you what you could do! … They should have sent you to jail, that's what you really deserved, I don't mind telling you!"

That's what I said to Robinson.

"Maybe so," Robinson answered back. "But even if you're a doctor and educated and all that, you'll never understand my nature …"

"You shut up," I finally told him. "You poor jerk, don't talk to me about your nature. You talk like a nut. I'm sorry Baryton has gone away God knows where, or he'd have taken you in! Best thing that could happen to you! Lock you up! See what I mean? Baryton would have known how to handle your nature!"

“If you’d had what I had and been through what I’ve been through,” he came back at me,

“you’d have been nuts yourself, I assure you! Maybe worse than me! … A softie like you!” And he began to bawl me out as windily as if he’d had a right to.

I watched him closely while he was gassing. I’d often been abused that way by the patients. It didn’t bother me any more.

He’d got a good deal thinner since Toulouse, and something had happened to his face, something I’d never seen before, a kind of portrait had settled on his features, with forgetfulness and silence all around it.

In all this Toulouse business there was something else that bothered him, it was only a minor part of the story, but it had gone against his grain, and when he thought about it now it came back at him like bile. It was having to grease the palms of a whole bunch of operators for nothing. When they’d taken over the crypt, he’d had to dish out commissions right and left, to the priest, the chair woman, the town hall, the vicars, and God knows who else, all to no end, and that had stuck in his craw … Just talking about it threw him into a fit. Thieving he called it.

“And now tell me, did you finally get married?” I asked him.

“I’ve told you already, no! I didn’t want to anymore.”

“But your little Madelon wasn’t bad? You can’t tell me different …”

“That’s not the question …”

“Oh yes it is. You said you were free, didn’t you? If you were dead set on leaving Toulouse, you could have left her mother in charge of the crypt for a while … you’d have come back later …”

“Physically yes, you’re right,” he went on. “I admit it, she was first class. You told me the truth. Especially because it so happened that when I got my sight back, the first thing I saw was her, in a mirror … Can you imagine? … In the light! … About two months after the old woman fell … I was trying to look at Madelon’s face, and then suddenly my sight came back … Like a flash of light … You get the picture?”

“Wasn’t it nice?”

“Sure, it was nice … But that’s not everything.”

“And you cleared out all the same? …”

“Yes, but let me explain, seeing you want to understand … She started it … she started thinking I was acting funny … that I’d lost my zip … that I wasn’t nice to her anymore … that kind of crap …”

“Maybe your conscience was troubling you …”

“Conscience?”

“Sure, why not?”

“Call it anything you want, I was feeling rotten, that’s all … But I don’t think it was conscience …”

“Were you sick?”

“Yeah, sick, that’s what it probably was. For the last hour I’ve been trying to make you say I’m sick … Admit you’re pretty slow …”

“Okay, okay,” I tell him. “Let’s say you’re sick if you think it’s the safest way …”

“It would make sense,” he assured me. “Because I wouldn’t put anything past her … She could start singing to the cops any day now.”

He sounded like he was giving me advice, and I didn’t want his advice. That kind of thing didn’t appeal to me at all, because of the complications it would lead to.

“Do you really think she’d talk?” I asked him, just to make sure … “After all, she was your accomplice in a way … That ought to make her think twice before shooting her mouth off …”

“Think twice!” Those words made him jump sky-high. “I can see you don’t know her …” I handed him a laugh. “Hell, she wouldn’t hesitate for one second … Like I’m telling you! If you knew her as well as I do, you wouldn’t doubt it! She’s in love, I tell you! Haven’t you ever known a woman in love? When she’s in love, she’s crazy. Crazy, I tell you! And it’s me she’s in love with and crazy about! … Do you know what that means? It means that anything crazy is just her meat! Craziness won’t stop her! Hell no!” I couldn’t tell him it rather surprised me to hear that Madelon had reached such a pitch of frenzy in a few months, because after all I’d known her slightly myself … I had my own ideas on the subject, but I couldn’t tell him that.

From the way she had handled herself in Toulouse and the things I’d heard her say when I was hidden behind the poplar tree on the day of the houseboat, it was hard for me to imagine that she could have changed so completely in so short a time … She had struck me as more shrewd than tragic, a smooth article, only too glad to get what attention she could with her fantasies and pretensions, wherever they seemed to wash … But in that particular situation there was nothing I could say, I had to let it ride. “All right! All right!” I said.

“And how about her mother? She must have let out a squawk when she realized you were clearing out for good? …”

“I’ll say! All day long she went on about my rotten character and, mind you, just when I’d have needed to be treated kindly! … You should have heard her! … Anyway, on account of the mother too, it couldn’t go on, so that’s when I suggested to Madelon that I’d leave them in the crypt while I went off by myself for a while to travel around and see the country …”

“‘Then you’ll take me with you,’ she protested … I’m your fiancée, aren’t I? … You’ll take me with you or you won’t go at all! … And besides, you’re not well enough yet’ …”

“I’m all well,’ I said, ‘and I’m going by myself.’ It dragged on and on.”

“‘A wife always goes with her husband,’ said the mother. ‘Why don’t you just get married?’

She backed her up just to bug me.

“Listening to that flapdoodle made me miserable. You know me! As if I needed a woman when I want to go to war! Or to run out on the war! Did I have women in Africa? Did I have a wife in America? … Hearing them go on like that for hours gave me a pain in the gut! A bellyache! I know what women are good for! And so do you! For nothing! I’ve traveled and I know. So one evening when they’d been driving me up the wall, I couldn’t stand it anymore and I told the mother what I thought of her! ‘You’re an old fool,’ I told her … ‘You’re even more dimwitted than Grandma Henrouille! … If you’d traveled a little more and known a few more people like I have, you wouldn’t be in such a hurry to give people advice, and it’s not by picking up little pieces of tallow in the corner of your stinking church that you’ll learn about life! You ought to get out of there yourself, it would do you good. Why don’t you take a walk once in a while, you old bag? A little fresh air would do you good. You’d have less time for your prayers and you wouldn’t smell so much like a cow …’

“That’s what I said to her mother! I can assure you, I’d been aching a long time to tell her off, and what’s more she needed it bad … But all in all, it’s me that got the most out of it … It sort of helped me out of the situation … It looked as if the old battle-ax had just been waiting for me to fly off the handle so she could call me all the names for son-of-a-bitch she knew! So she let loose and said a lot more than she needed to. ‘Thief! Lounge lizard!’

she yelled … ‘You haven’t even got a trade! … It’s going on a year that I’ve been supporting you and my daughter! … Pimp! …’ Get the idea? A regular family scene … She seemed to be thinking it over for a while, and then she blurted out, she really put her heart in it: ‘Murderer! Murderer!’ That kind of gave me the shivers.

“When her daughter heard that, she was afraid I’d kill her mother on the spot. She flung herself between us and closed her mother’s mouth with her own hand. Which was just as well. So the two of them are in cahoots, I said to myself. It was obvious , . , Well, I let it go … The time for violence was past … And anyway, what did I care if they were in cahoots? … Maybe you think that after letting off all that steam they’d leave me alone … Not at all! If that’s what you think, you don’t know them … The daughter started up again. Her head was on fire and so was her cunt … She started up worse than ever …

“‘I love you, Léon … Can’t you see that I love you?’

“That’s all she knew, her ‘I love you’ jazz. As if that was the answer to everything.

“‘What! You still love him?’ her mother put in. ‘Can’t you see that he’s nothing but a thug?

The lowest of the low! Now that he's got his eyesight back, thanks to our care, he'll bring you nothing but misery. Just take it from me, your mother! …'

"To finish up the scene, we all cried, even me, because whatever happened I didn't want to get in too bad with those chippies, I didn't want us to be too much on the outs.

"So I went out for a walk. We'd said too much, and staying in the same room we couldn't have controlled ourselves for long. Even so we kept wrangling off and on for weeks, and keeping an eye on each other, especially at night.

"We couldn't make up our minds to break up, but our hearts weren't in it anymore. It was mostly fear that kept us together.

"'You must love somebody else!' Madelon would say now and then.

"I'd try to reassure her: 'Not at all! Of course not!' But it was obvious that she didn't believe me. The way she saw it, you had to love somebody, there was no getting around it.

"'Just tell me this,' I'd say. 'What would I do with another woman?' But she had love on the brain. There was nothing I could say to calm her. She dreamed up stuff I'd never heard before. I'd never have suspected she was hiding such rubbish in her head.

"'You took my heart, Léon!' she'd fire at me in all seriousness. 'You want to go?' she blustered. 'All right, go! But I warn you, Léon, I'll die of grief! …' Die of grief on my account? Where's the sense in that, I ask you. 'No, no,' I'd say. 'You won't die. And in the first place I never took anything at all. I haven't even knocked you up! Think it over. I haven't given you any diseases either! Or have I? Well then! All I want is to go away, that's all! A kind of vacation … What's wrong with that? … Try to be reasonable …' But the more I tried to make her understand my point of view, the less she thought of my point of view. In fact we didn't understand each other at all anymore … It drove her crazy to think that I might really feel the way I said I did, that everything I said was true, simple, and sincere.

"Besides, she thought it was you who was trying to get me to beat it … And seeing that she couldn't hold me by making me ashamed of my feelings, she tried a different way of holding me.

"'Don't go thinking I want you because of the crypt and the business,' she'd say. 'You know I don't really care about money … What I want, Léon, is to stay with you … And to be happy … That's all … It's perfectly natural … I don't want you to leave me … It's too cruel for people to separate when they've loved each other like we have … Swear to me at least that you won't be gone for long …'

"It went on like that for weeks. She was in love all right, a real pest … Every evening she came back to her love jazz … In the end she was willing to leave her mother in charge of the crypt, on condition that the two of us went to Paris together to look for work … Always together! … A screwball! She was willing to put up with anything you could think of except that we should go our separate ways … On that subject the answer was strictly no … So naturally the harder she dug in the sicker I got of the whole business!

"It was no use trying to put any sense into her. I knew I was wasting my time and only getting her more stirred up. So I had to start thinking up ways to get rid of her love as she called it … That was what made me think of telling her that I kind of went out of my mind now and then … That fits would come on … without warning … She gave me a funny look … She didn't rightly know if this was another fish story or not. But anyway, considering the adventures I'd told her about and what the war had done to me and my latest exploit with Grandma Henrouille and the funny way I was acting with her, it gave her food for thought …

"She thought for more than a week and didn't bother me all that time … She must have said a word or two to her mother about my fits … Anyway, they didn't seem so eager to hang on to me anymore … 'Good deal!' I said to myself. 'It's going to be all right! Free at last! …' I could already see myself slipping quietly away in the direction of Paris without any breakage … But not so fast! … I started overdoing it … Frills! … I thought I'd hit on a smart way of proving to her once and for all that I'd been telling the truth … That I really went nuts when the spirit moved me … 'Feel!' I said to Madelon one evening. 'Feel the bump on the back of my head! And the scar on top of it! Some bump, eh?'

"When she'd had a good feel of the bump on the back of my head, it really started her off, I can tell you … But imagine, it didn't disgust her at all, far from it, it gave her hotter pants than ever … 'That's where I was wounded in Flanders,'I said. That's where I was trepanned …'

"'Oh, Léon!' she cried out, still feeling the bump. 'Can you ever forgive me, Léon? … I doubted you up to now,

but now I beg your forgiveness with all my heart! I see it all now!

I've been beastly to you! Oh yes, I have! I've been awful! … I'll never be mean to you again! I swear it! I want to make it up to you, Léon. Right away! You'll let me make it up to you, won't you? … I'll make you happy again … Oh, how I'll take care of you! Starting today! I'd be ever so patient with you! So gentle! You'll see, Léon! I'll be so good to you you won't be able to get along without me! I'll give you back all my heart, I belong to you! … Every bit of me! I'll give you my whole life, Léon! Only tell me you forgive me, tell me, Léon!'

"I hadn't said any of that, she'd said it all herself, so naturally she had no trouble answering herself … How in God's name was I to stop her?

"It looked like feeling my scar and my bump had made her drunk with love all of a sudden!

She wanted to take my head in both hands and never let it go and make me happy from then to Eternity, whether I liked it or not! After that scene her mother wasn't allowed to bawl me out anymore. Madelon didn't even let her mother talk. You wouldn't have known her, she wanted to protect me to the bitter end!

"It couldn't go on. Naturally I'd rather we parted friends … But it was no use … She was bursting with love, and she was stubborn. One morning when she and her mother were out shopping, I did the same as you, I made up a little bundle and beat it on the quiet … After all I've told you, you won't try to tell me I wasn't patient enough … Believe me, there was nothing I hadn't tried … Now you know the whole story … When I tell you that girl would stop at nothing and that she's likely to come here looking for me any minute, don't try and tell me I'm seeing things … I know what I'm talking about! I know her! And we'd be a lot safer in my opinion if she found me locked up with the nuts … That way I could pretend not to understand … With her that's the only way … Just let on that you don't know what she's talking about …"

Two or three months before, I'd have been interested in what Robinson was telling me, but I seem to have aged all of a sudden.

I guess I'd been getting more and more like Baryton, I didn't give a damn. What Robinson had been telling me about his adventure in Toulouse didn't strike me as a very real danger anymore. I tried in vain to get excited about his situation, but his situation had a musty smell about it. Maybe we like to think different, but the world leaves us long before we leave it … for good.

One fine day you decide to talk less and less about the things you care most about, and when you have to say something, it costs you an effort … You're good and sick of hearing yourself talk … you abridge … You give up … For thirty years you've been talking … You don't care about being right anymore. You even lose your desire to keep hold of the small place you'd reserved yourself among the pleasures of life … You're fed up … From that time on you're content to eat a little something, cadge a little warmth, and sleep as much as possible on the road to nowhere. To rekindle your interest, you'd have to think up some new grimaces to put on in the presence of others … But you no longer have the strength to renew your repertory. You stammer. Sure, you still look for excuses for hanging around with the boys, but death is there too, stinking, right beside you, it's there the whole time, less mysterious than a game of poker. The only thing you continue to value is petty regrets, like not finding time to run out to Bois-Colombes to see your uncle while he was still alive, the one whose little song died forever one afternoon in February. That horrible little regret is all we have left of life, we've vomited up the rest along the way, with a good deal of effort and misery. We're nothing now but an old lamppost with memories on a street where hardly anyone passes anymore.

If you've got to be unhappy, you may as well keep regular habits. I insisted on everybody in the house being in bed by ten o'clock. I was the one who turned out the lights. The business took care of itself.

We didn't overtax our imaginations. The Baryton system of taking cretins to the movies kept us busy enough. Under our management the institution wasn't run as economically as it had been. Wanton waste, we figured, might bring the chief back, since it gave him such nightmares.

We had bought an accordion, so Robinson could play music for the patients to dance to in the garden during the summer months. It was hard to keep the inmates busy day and night. We couldn't send them to church all the time, they got too bored.

We received no further reports from Toulouse. Abbé Protiste never came back to see us. The asylum settled down to a life of furtive monotony. We weren't easy in our minds. Too many ghosts around.

Months passed. Robinson was looking better. At Easter time our patients became rather agitated, women in light-colored dresses had taken to strolling back and forth outside the garden. Harbingers of spring. I gave

them bromides.

At the Tarapout the cast had been changed several times since the days when I'd worked there. The little English girls were far away, I was told. In Australia. We'd never see them again …

I wasn't allowed backstage since the business with Tania. I didn't press the point. We started writing letters all over the place, especially to the consulates of the northern countries, to try and get some news of Baryton's movements. There were no answers of any interest.

Meanwhile Parapine performed his technical duties in dignified silence. I doubt if in twenty-four months he had uttered more than twenty sentences in all. I was obliged to attend to the daily material and administrative details practically unaided. I made a few mistakes. Parapine never held them up to me. We got along fine together by dint of sheer indifference. An adequate turnover of patients kept the institution going nicely. After paying for supplies and rent, we still had more than enough to live on, and it goes without saying that Aimee's aunt was paid regularly for the child's board.

Robinson, I had the impression, was suffering much less from anxiety than when he got there. He was looking better and had gained three kilos. On the whole it seemed that as long as families had little lunatics in their midst, they would keep coming to us, conveniently situated as we were, at two steps from the capital. Our garden alone was worth the trip. On fine summer days people would come from Paris just to admire our flowerbeds and our clumps of roses.

It was on one of those Sundays in June that I thought I recognized Madelon for the first time, in the middle of a group of strollers. For a moment she stood there, just outside our gate.

At first I didn't want to mention this apparition to Robinson, for fear of frightening him, but then, thinking it over, I advised him, for a time at least, to give up the aimless strolls in the neighborhood that he'd got in the habit of taking. My advice had him worried. But he didn't ask to know more. Toward the end of July we received a few postcards from Baryton, this time from Finland. We were glad to hear from him, but he didn't say one word about coming back, he only wished us good luck and sent us friendly greetings, Two months passed and then more … Again the roads were covered with summer dust. Around All Saints' Day one of our lunatics caused something of a stir outside our Institute. This patient had always been quiet and well behaved, but the mortuary excitement of All Saints was too much for him. We weren't quick enough to stop him from standing at the window and shouting that he didn't ever want to die … The passers-by thought he was too funny for words … In the midst of this ruckus I again had the unpleasant impression, but much more definitely than the first time, of having recognized Madelon in the front row of a group at the exact same place outside the gate.

In the night that followed I was awakened by a feeling of distress. I tried in vain to forget what I had seen. There was no point in trying to get back to sleep.

I hadn't been back to Rancy in a long time. As long as I was being pursued by a nightmare, I wondered if it mightn't be a good idea to take a look out there, where all misfortunes came from sooner or later … I'd left plenty of nightmares behind me out there … In a pinch you might think of going to meet them halfway as a kind of precaution … Coming from Vigny, the shortest way to Rancy is along the Seine as far as the Gennevilliers Bridge, the low flat one. The slow river mists break up just over the water, rise, drift, race, stagger, and fall on the other side of the parapet, around the little dim lamps. The big tractor factory on the left is hiding in a great chunk of darkness. The windows have been opened by a dismal conflagration that is burning it away from inside and goes on and on. After the factory you're alone on the riverbank … But you can't lose your way … Your degree of fatigue gives you a pretty good idea that you've reached your destination.

At that point you just have to turn left into the Rue des Bournaires, and then it's not far. It's easy to get your bearings because of the green and red signal lights at the grade crossing, which are always lit.

Even in the middle of the night I could have found the Henrouilles' house with my eyes closed. I'd gone there often enough in the old days …

But that night, just outside their door, I started to think instead of going ahead … Madame Henrouille, it came to me, was living there alone now. They were all dead, all of them … She must have known, or at least suspected, how the old woman had died in Toulouse … I wondered how she had felt about it …

The street lamp whitened the glass top of the little portico over the doorstep like a snowfall. I stood on the street corner for a long time, just looking. I could have gone and rung the bell. I'm sure she'd have let me in. We hadn't quarreled after all. It was freezing cold where I was standing …

The street still ended in a bog, same as in my time. They'd promised to send workmen, but they never had. No one passed that way anymore.

It wasn't that I was afraid of Madame Henrouille. No. But all of a sudden I had lost all desire to see her. Wanting to see her had been a mistake. There, outside her house, I suddenly realized that there was nothing more she could tell me … Listening to her would have bored me, it was as simple as that … We were nothing to each other anymore. By then I'd gone further into the night than she had, further even than Grandma Henrouille, who was dead. We weren't all together anymore … We had left each other for good … Death had come between us and so had life … Inevitably … Each man for himself, I mumbled … and started back to Vigny.

Madame Henrouille hadn't had enough education to follow me any further … Character, yes, she had plenty of that … But no education! That was the rub. No education!

Education is indispensable! That's why she couldn't understand me anymore, or understand what was going on around us, vicious and stubborn as she was … That's not enough … You need a heart and a certain amount of knowledge to go further than other people … To get back to the Seine I took the Rue des Sanzillons and then the Impasse Vasson. My worry was all straightened out. I was pleased, almost happy, because now I knew that there was no point in batting my brains out over the Henrouille woman, I'd finally dropped her by the wayside, the bitch! … What a number! We'd been pretty good friends in our own way … We had understood each other for quite some time … But now she wasn't low enough for me, and she couldn't go down any further … To catch up with me … She had neither the education nor the strength. You don't go up in life, you go down. And she couldn't get down to where I was … There was too much night around me. Passing the house where Bébert's aunt had been the concierge, I'd have liked to go in and see who was living now in the lodge where I'd taken care of Bébert and where he had died. Maybe his schoolboy picture was still hanging over the bed … But it was too late to be waking people up. I went on without showing myself …

A little further on, on the Faubourg de la Liberte, I saw the light still burning in Bézin's junk shop … I hadn't expected that … But it was only a gas jet in the middle of the window. Bézin knew all the news and gossip of the neighborhood from hanging around the cafés … He was known all the way from the Flea Market to the Porte Maillot. He could have told me some good ones if he'd been awake. I pushed his door. The bell rang, but no one answered. I knew that he slept in the back room, his dining room actually … And there he was in the dark with his head between his arms on the table, sitting twisted beside his cold dinner that was still waiting, lentils. He had begun to eat. Sleep had grabbed hold of him the moment he started. He was snoring loudly. True, he'd been drinking. I well remember what day it was, a Thursday, the day of the market at Les Lilas … He had a green cloth full of his acquisitions spread out at his feet. I had always liked Bézin, he was no crummier than most. Obliging, easygoing … I wasn't going to wake him up just out of curiosity, just to get answers to my few little questions … So I turned off the gas and left.

I'm sure he had a hard time making ends meet in that business of his. But at least he found no difficulty in falling asleep.

I can't deny that I felt sad as I started back to Vigny at the thought that all those people, those houses, those dirty, dingy, dismal things no longer spoke to me at all, no longer spoke straight to my heart as they had in the old days, and that, chipper as I might seem, I quite possibly didn't have the strength to go on much further like that alone.

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About meals at Vigny, we had stuck to the same arrangements as in Baryton's day, that is, we all got together at table, except that now we usually ate in the billiard room above the concierge's lodge. It was cosier than the regular dining room, where unpleasant memories of English conversations still hung in the air. And besides, the furniture in the dining room was too good for us? genuine "1900" pieces with opaline stained-glass windows. From the billiard room you could see everything that was going on in the street. That could come in handy. We'd spend whole Sundays in that room. Now and then we'd invite a doctor from the neighborhood to dinner, but our usual guest was Gustave, the traffic cop. He was regular. I can vouch for that. We'd got acquainted out of the window one Sunday, watching him on duty at the crossroads coming into town. The cars were giving him trouble. First we just exchanged a few words, and then from Sunday to Sunday we really got acquainted. It so happened that I'd cared for his two sons in Paris, one with measles, the other with mumps. Gustave Mandamour, that was his name, from Cantal, was our faithful friend. Conversation with him could be kind of trying, because he had trouble with his words. He could find them all right, but he couldn't get them out, they'd stay in his mouth making noises.

One evening Robinson invited him into the billiard room, as a joke I think. But it was Gustave's nature to keep on with anything he had started, so after that he came every evening at the same time, eight o'clock. He felt at ease with us, better than at the café, as he himself told us, because of the political discussions at the cafe that often got out of hand. We, on the other hand, never talked politics. In Gustave's case politics was a ticklish subject. It had got him into trouble at the cafe. The fact is, he should always have steered clear of politics, especially when he had a few drinks under his belt, which sometimes happened. In fact he had a reputation for drinking, that was his weakness. While with us he felt safe in every respect. He admitted it. We didn't drink. At our place he could let himself go and no harm would come of it. He knew he could trust us.

When Parapine and I thought of the situation we had escaped from and the one that had fallen into our laps at Baryton's, we didn't complain, there was no call to, because all things considered we'd had a miraculous stroke of luck, and we had all the social standing and material comfort we needed.

Still, for my part, I had never imagined that the miracle would last. I had a crummy past behind me, and already it was coming back at me like the belchings of fate. At the very start in Vigny I had received three anonymous letters that had seemed as suspicious and as menacing as could be. And then scads of other equally vicious letters. It's true that we often received anonymous letters at Vigny and didn't pay much attention to them as a rule. Usually they came from former patients, whose persecution mania had followed them home.

But these letters and their turns of phrase had me worried, they weren't like the others, their accusations were precise, and they were all about me and Robinson. To come right out with it, they accused us of shacking up together. A crummy insinuation. At first I was reluctant to mention them to Robinson, but I finally decided to when I kept receiving more and more letters of the same kind. So then the two of us tried to figure out who could have sent them. We drew up a list of all the possible people we both knew. That didn't get us anywhere. Anyway, this accusation didn't make sense. Homosexuality wasn't my line, and Robinson didn't give a damn about sex one way or the other. If anything was bugging him, it certainly wasn't sex. Only a jealous woman could have dreamed up such rotten calumnies. In short, of all the people we knew, only Madelon seemed capable of pursuing us all the way to Vigny with such foul fabrications. She could go on writing her poisoned letters for all I cared … What I feared was that, exasperated at getting no answer, she'd come around in person one of these days and kick up a ruckus at the Institute. You had to expect the worst.

For several weeks we jumped every time the bell rang. I was expecting a visit from Madelon, or still worse, from the police.

Every time Gustave Mandamour came around for his game a little earlier than usual, I wondered if he didn't have a summons tucked in his belt, but in those days Mandamour was still as friendly and easygoing as could be. It wasn't until later that he too underwent a striking change. At that time he came almost every day and lost every game he played with perfect equanimity. If his disposition changed, it was definitely our fault. One evening, just out of curiosity, I asked Mandamour why he never won at cards. I had no serious reason for asking him, only my mania for knowing the why and the wherefore … Especially seeing that we didn't play for money. While we were talking about his bad luck, I stepped up to him, studied him closely, and saw that he was extremely farsighted. The fact is that with the lighting we had there he could barely distinguish clubs from diamonds. Something was bound to happen.

I corrected his infirmity by giving him a nice pair of glasses. At first he was delighted with them, but not for long. Since he played better with his glasses, he didn't lose as often as before, and then he took it into his head

to stop losing altogether. That was impossible, so he cheated. And when, as sometimes happened, he lost in spite of his cheating, he sulked for hours. In short, he became impossible.

I was aghast, he'd get sore for no reason at all, and to make matters worse he'd try to upset us, to give us things to worry about. When he lost, he'd get even, in his own way … And yet, I repeat, we weren't playing for money, only for fun and glory … But he was furious all the same.

One evening when his luck had been bad, he harangued us before leaving: "Gentlemen, I'm warning you to watch your step! … Considering the people you associate with, if I were you, I'd be careful! … Among others, there's a dark-haired woman who's been passing your house for days! … A lot too often, if you ask me! … She must have her reasons! … I wouldn't be surprised if she had a bone to pick with one of you gentlemen! …" That's the pernicious way Mandamour threw this thing in our faces before leaving the room. That got a rise out of us all right! … Nevertheless, I pulled myself together in an instant. "Oh, thank you Gustave," I answered calmly. "I don't see who this dark-haired woman you refer to can be … None of our former female patients, as far as I know, has had reason to complain of our care … It must be some poor deranged creature … We'll find out … Anyway, you're right, it's always best to know … Thanks again for telling us, Gustave … And good evening."

Robinson's consternation was such that he couldn't get up from his chair. When the policeman had gone, we examined the information he'd given us from every angle. After all, it could be another woman, it didn't have to be Madelon … There were others who used to hang around under the windows of our nuthouse … Still, there was good reason to believe it was she, and the mere possibility scared us out of our wits. If it was Madelon, what was she up to now? And what could she have been living on all these months in Paris? And supposing she was going to turn up in person, we'd better talk it over right away and decide what to do.

"Look here, Robinson," I said. "Make up your mind, it's high time, and don't change it … What do you want to do? Do you want to go back to Toulouse with her?"

"No, I tell you. No no no!" That was his answer. Plain enough.

"Okay," I said. "But in that case, if you really don't want to go back with her, the best thing, in my opinion, would be for you to leave the country for a while and try and make a living somewhere else. That's the surest way to get rid of her … She wouldn't follow you out of the country, would she? … You're still young … You've recovered your health … You're rested … We'll give you a little money, take it and shove off … That's my advice … Besides, you must be aware that this is no job for you … You can't go on like this forever …"

If he had listened to me, if he had cleared out then and there, it would have suited me, I'd have been really glad. But he wouldn't buy it.

"Why are you so mean to me, Ferdinand?" he said. "It's not nice of you at my age … Just look at me! …" He didn't want to shove off. He was sick of moving around.

"This is as far as I'll go," he said. "Say what you please … do what you please … I won't go …"

That was how he requited my friendship. Still, I kept trying.

"But what if Madelon were to turn you in, just supposing, in connection with old Madame Henrouille? … You told me yourself that you wouldn't put it past her."

"That would be just too bad," he said. "She can do as she pleases …" That kind of talk was something new, coming from Robinson. Up until then he had never been a fatalist …

"At least go find yourself some little job nearby, in a factory, then you won't have to be here with us all the time … If somebody comes looking for you, we'll have time to warn you."

Parapine was in complete agreement with me. The matter must have struck him as really grave and urgent because he even went so far as to say a few words to us. We'd have to figure out some place to put Robinson, where he wouldn't be noticed … One of our business connections was a carriage maker not far away who owed us a small debt of gratitude for certain little favors we'd done him in awkward situations. He agreed to give Robinson a trial at hand painting. It was delicate work, not hard and nicely paid.

"Léon," we told him the morning he started in. "Don't make a fool of yourself in your new job, don't attract attention with your screwed-up ideas … Arrive on time … Don't leave before the others … Say good morning to everybody … In other words, behave. It's a decent shop, and you've been well recommended …"

But right away he got himself spotted, though you can't say it was his fault. A stool pigeon, who worked in one of the other workshops, saw him going into the boss's private office. That did it. Reported. Undesirable element. Fired.

So a few days later Robinson came back to us, jobless. It was bound to happen. Then, just about the same day, he started coughing again. We auscultated him and found a whole collection of rales all up and down his right lung. Calling for bed rest. One Saturday evening just before dinner someone asked for me personally in the reception room.

A woman, they tell me.

It was her all right, wearing a little three-cornered hat and gloves. I remember well. No need of preliminaries. She couldn't have picked a worse moment. I give it to her straight before she can say a word.

"Madelon," I said, "if you've come to see Léon, I can tell you right away to forget it … Just turn around and go home … His lungs are affected and so is his head … Quite seriously, I might add … You can't see him … Anyway, he has nothing to say to you …"

"Not even to me?"

"No, not even to you … Especially not to you," I added. I expected her to flare up. No, she only stood there in front of me, shaking her head from side to side and compressing her lips. With her eyes she tried to find me where she had left me in her memory. I wasn't there anymore. I, too, had moved in her memory. In that situation I'd have been afraid of a husky man, but from her I had nothing to fear. She was only a weak woman, so to speak. I had always wanted to slap a face consumed with anger, to see what a face consumed with anger would do under the circumstances. A slap or a fat check is what it takes if you want to see all the passions that go beating about behind a face take a sudden tack. It's as beautiful as watching a sailing ship maneuvering in a stormy sea. The whole person keels over in the changed wind. That's what I wanted to see. For at least twenty years that desire had been goading me. On the street, in cafés, wherever aggressive, touchy, boastful people quarrel. I'd never have dared for fear of getting hit back and even more of the shame that comes of getting hit. But here for once I had a golden opportunity.

"Get out!" I said, just to raise her fury to white heat.

She couldn't get over my talking to her like that. She started to smile, hideously, repulsively, as if she thought me ridiculous and really contemptible … "Smack! Smack!" I slapped her face twice, hard enough to stun a mule.

She slumped down on the big divan on the other side of the room, against the wall, with her head between her hands. Her breath came in short gasps and she moaned like a puppy that's been beaten too much. Then, as if she'd thought it over, she jumped up, light and bouncy, and went out the door without even turning her head. I hadn't seen a thing. I'd have to try again.

But regardless of what we did, she was smarter than all of us together. She saw her Robinson again, she saw him as often as she pleased … It was Parapine who first spotted them together. They were on the terrace of a cafe across from the Gare de 1'Est. I'd suspected they were seeing each other, but I didn't want to seem to be taking the slightest interest in their relations. After all, it was none of my business. He was doing his work at the rest home, and not at all badly, taking care of the paralytics, a nasty job if ever there was one, wiping them, sponging them, changing their underwear, helping them slobber. We couldn't expect any more of him.

If he chose to see his Madelon on the afternoons when I sent him to Paris on errands, that was his business. We definitely hadn't seen her at Vigny-sur-Seine since those slaps in the face. But I was pretty sure that since then she must have told him some rotten things about me.

I stopped talking to Robinson about Toulouse, as if none of all that had ever happened. Six months passed for better or worse, and then there was a vacancy on our staff, and we suddenly needed a nurse, skilled in massage. The old one had gone off to get married without giving notice.

Quite a few fine-looking girls applied for the job. In fact, so many strapping young women of all nationalities flocked to Vigny as soon as our ad appeared that we were hard put to it to choose among them. In the end we picked a Slovak by the name of Sophie, whose complexion, energetic yet gentle bearing, and divine good health struck us, I have to admit, as irresistible.

This Sophie knew only a few words of French, but I undertook without delay, the least I could do, to give her lessons. And lo and behold, in contact with her youth and freshness I felt my interest in teaching revive,

though Baryton had done everything in his power to disgust me with it. Impenitent! But what youth! What vigor! What muscles! What an excuse! Supple! Springy! Amazing! Her beauty was diminished by none of that false or true reticence that impedes ail-too occidental converse. Frankly, I couldn't admire her enough. From muscle to muscle, I proceeded by anatomical groups … By muscular slopes, by regions … I never wearied of pursuing that concentrated yet relaxed vigor, distributed in bundles which by turns evaded and consented to the touch … Beneath her satin, taut or relaxed, miraculous skin! …

The era of these living joys, of great undeniable physiological and comparative harmonies is yet to come … The body, a godhead mauled by my shameful hands … The hands of an honest man, that unknown priest … Death and Words must give their permission first … What foul affectations! A cultivated man needs to be rolled in a dense layer of symbols, caked to the asshole with artistic excrement, before he can tear off a piece … Then anything can happen! A bargain! Think of the saving, getting all your thrills from reminiscences … Reminiscences are something we've got plenty of, one can buy beauties, enough to last us a lifetime … Life is more complicated, especially the life of human forms … A hard adventure. None more desperate. Compared with the addiction to perfect forms, cocaine is a pastime for stationmasters.

But let's get back to our Sophie! Her mere presence seemed a feat of daring in our sulking, fearful, unsavory household.

After she had been with us for some time, we were still glad to number her among our nurses, yet we could not help fearing that she might one day disturb the fabric of our infinite precautions or suddenly, one fine morning, wake up to our sleazy reality. Sophie still failed to suspect the depth of our fetid resignation! A gang of failures! We admired her, so alive in our midst … just her way of getting up from a chair, coming to our table, leaving it again … She charmed us …

And every time she performed those simple gestures, we experienced surprise and joy. We made strides in poetry, so to speak, just marveling at her being so beautiful and so much more obviously free than we were. The rhythm of her life sprang from other wellsprings than ours … Our wellsprings were forever slow and slimy.

The joyful strength, precise yet gentle, which animated her from her hair to her ankles troubled us, alarmed us in a charming sort of way, but definitely alarmed us, yes, that's the word.

Though our instinct reveled in her innate joy, our peevish knowledge of the things of this world rather frowned on it, that essentially frightened, ever-present knowledge which cowers in the cellars of existence, accustomed to the worst by habit, by experience. Sophie had the winged, elastic, precise gait that is so frequent, almost habitual, among the women of America, the gait of heroic creatures of the future, whom life and ambition carry lightly toward new kinds of adventure … Three-masters of joyful warmth, bound for the Infinite …

Parapine, who was hardly given to lyricism on the subject of attractive women, would smile to himself when she left the room. Just to look at her did your soul good. Especially mine, I must say, which had lost none of its aptitude for desire.

Wishing to take her by surprise, to ravish a little of her pride, of the prestige and power she had acquired over me, to diminish her, in short to humanize her a little and reduce her to our paltry proportions, I would go into her room when she was sleeping.

At such times, Sophie offered a very different sight?more commonplace, yet surprising and reassuring as well. Without ostentation, almost uncovered, lying crosswise on the bed, legs every which way, skin moist and relaxed, she was battling with fatigue. In the depths of her body she dug into sleep, so hard that it made her snore. That was the only time when I found her within my reach. No more enchantment. No joking. This was serious. She toiled as though to pump more life out of existence … At such times she was greedy, drunk with wanting more and more. You should have seen her after those sleeping bouts, still swollen, her organs exultant, ecstatic under her rosy skin. At such times she was funny, as laughable as other people. For some minutes she'd reel with happiness, then the full light of day would come to her and delivered, as if too heavy a cloud had just passed, she'd resume her glorious flight …

All that can be fucked. It's extremely pleasant to grasp this moment when matter becomes life. You rise up to the endless plateau that spreads out before men. "Whew!" you go. And again "Whew!" You come the limit up there, and then it's like an enormous desert … Among us, her friends rather than employers, I, I believe, was the most intimate. True, she was regularly unfaithful to me with the orderly in charge of the violent ward, an ex-fireman. For my own good, she told me, so as not to put too great a strain on me, considering all the brain work I had under way, which wasn't exactly compatible with the demands of her fiery temperament. Entirely

for my own good. She cuckolded me in the interest of hygiene. What could I say?

All this, when I think of it, could have given me nothing but pleasure if the Madelon business hadn't been weighing on my mind. One fine day I told Sophie the whole story to see what she'd say. Telling her my troubles made me feel a little better. I was sick of the endless quarrels and resentments growing out of that wretched passion, and Sophie thought I was perfectly right.

Seeing that Robinson and I had been such good friends, she thought we should all have one big reconciliation, just patch the whole thing up as quickly as possible. Her advice came from a good heart. Central Europe is full of good hearts. The only trouble was that she didn't know much about the characters and reactions of the people around here. With the best intentions in the world she gave me the worst possible advice. I came to realize that she'd been wrong, but too late.

"You should see Madelon," she advised me. "From what you've told me, I'm sure she's a good girl deep down … It's just that you provoked her, and you were really brutal and mean to her … You owe her an apology and a nice present too, to make her forget …" That's the way things were done in her country. Everything she advised me to do was exquisitely polite but not at all practical.

I took her advice, mostly because behind all the frills and foolishness, behind the diplomatic maneuvers, I envisaged the possibility of a little foursome that would have been most entertaining, in fact it would have made a new man of me. Under the pressure of age and circumstances, I note to my sorrow, my friendly feelings were taking an insidiously erotic turn. Betrayal. And Sophie, without meaning to, was abetting me in this betrayal. There was so much curiosity in Sophie she couldn't help being attracted by danger. An excellent nature, nothing Protestant about her, she never tried to belittle the opportunities life offered and was never suspicious of them. Just my type. She went further. She understood the need for variety in the distractions of the rear end. An adventurous disposition of that sort, you'll have to agree, is most unusual in women. We had definitely picked the right one. She wanted me, and I thought it perfectly natural, to give her some idea of Madelon's physique. She was afraid of seeming awkward in an intimate situation with a Frenchwoman, in view of the stupendous reputation in this line that has been pinned on Frenchwomen in foreign parts. As for enduring Robinson's attentions at the same time, it was only to give me pleasure that she consented. Robinson didn't send her at all, so she said, but on the whole we were in agreement. That was the main thing. Okay. I waited a while for a good opportunity to approach Robinson with my plan for a general reconciliation. One morning when he was in the office copying medical reports into the big book, the moment struck me as propitious, and I interrupted him to ask him very simply whether he thought it would be a good idea for me to see Madelon and suggest that we let our violent bygones be bygones … Whether on the same occasion I might introduce her to Sophie, my new friend? And lastly, if he didn't think it was time we all got together and patched up our quarrels.

At first, I could see, he hesitated, then he replied, but without enthusiasm, that he saw no objection … I suspect Madelon had told him that I'd try to see her soon on one pretext or another. About the slap in the face I'd given her the day she came to Vigny, I didn't breathe a word.

I couldn't run the risk of his yelling at me there and calling me a brute in public, because after all, though we'd been friends a long time, there in the institution he was under my orders. Authority first.

January was a funny time for that sort of operation. Because it was most convenient, we decided to meet in Paris one Sunday and go to the movies together. We thought maybe we'd drop in at the Batignolles carnival for a while first if it wasn't too cold out. Robinson had promised to take her to the Batignolles carnival. Madelon, he told me, was wild about carnivals. That was a lucky thing. Meeting again for the first time, a carnival was the best possible place.

We sure got an eyeful of that carnival! And a headful too! Bim bam! And bam again! We whirl around! And we're carried away! And we scream and we yell! There we were, in the crowd with lights and noise and all the rest of it! Step up, step up! Show your skill, show your daring, and laugh laugh laugh! Wheel Everyone tried in his overcoat to appear to his best advantage, sharp and just a little aloof, to show that he usually went elsewhere for his entertainment, to more "expensif" places, as they say in English. You tried to make the impression of knowing, lighthearted young blades in spite of the icy wind, just one more humiliation, and the depressing fear that you were spending too much money on these amusements and might have occasion to regret it for a whole week. The merry-go-round sends up a big belch of music. It can't quite deliver itself of the waltz from Faust, but it tries hard. The waltz plumps down and shoots up again and swirls around the circular ceiling, which spins with its thousands of pastry light bulbs. The steam calliope's having a bad time. The music is giving it a pain in its pipe, its stomach. Would you care for a piece of nougat? Or would you rather try another target? Take your choice. In our group at the shooting gallery it was Madelon, with the brim of her hat turned up over her forehead, who showed the most skill. "Look," she says to Robinson. "My

hand isn't shaking. And we had plenty to drink, didn't we?" … Just to show you the kind of things we were saying. We'd just come out of a restaurant. "One more try!" And Madelon won the bottle of champagne. Bing bang! Bull's-eye! Then I bet her she can't catch me on the Dodge'em cars. "I'll take you up on that," she says as chipper as you please. "We'll take separate cars!" And there we go! I was glad she'd accepted. It was a way of making up to her. Sophie wasn't jealous. She had her reasons.

So Robinson climbs into the back car with Madelon and I get into another up front with Sophie. Man, do we collide! And it's crash! And hold tight! But I see right away that Madelon doesn't enjoy being shaken up. Neither does Léon for that matter, he used to like it, but no more. It's plain that he doesn't feel comfortable with us. While we're clutching at the rail, some sailorboys come along and start feeling us up, men and women alike, and making propositions. We're freezing. We shake them off. We laugh. More and more feeleruppers come from all directions with music and rhythm and excitement. You get such jolts on these barrels on wheels that your eyes pop out of your head every time you clash. Great fun! Violence and joy! The whole accordion of pleasures! I want to make up with Madelon before we leave the carnival. I want to very much, but she doesn't respond to my overtures anymore. It's no soap. She's snubbing me. Keeping me at a distance. I can't make her out. These moods that come over her. I'd had hopes of something better. Physically, come to think of it, she has changed completely.

She can't bear comparison with Sophie, no sparkle, no luster. Good humor was more becoming to her, but now she has an air of possessing superior knowledge. That irritates me. I'd gladly give her another slap in the face, maybe that would bring her around or maybe then she'd tell me what she knows that's so superior. Come on, smile! This is a place of merriment, we haven't come here to weep! Let's whoop it up!

She's found work with an aunt of hers, so she tells Sophie while we're strolling later on. On the Rue du Rocher. Her aunt is a corset maker. May as well believe her. It wasn't hard to see that if reconciliation was the idea, this meeting was a failure. My little scheme was a washout too. In fact, a gigantic flop.

Seeing each other again had been a mistake. Sophie hadn't really grasped the situation. She hadn't realized that this get-together would just make everything more complicated … Robinson should have warned me, told me how stubborn she was … Too bad! Oh well!

Barn! Bam! The carnival goes on! Let's try the "Caterpillar," as they call it. My idea and my treat! One more attempt to make up with Madelon. But she keeps slipping away from me, avoiding me. Taking advantage of the crush, she climbs into another seat up front with Robinson, I'm flummoxed again. We're dazed by waves and whirls of darkness. I mutter under my breath that it's hopeless. Sophie finally agrees with me. She realizes that in this whole affair I had been led away by my lecherous fantasies. "You see how it is? She's sore. I think we'd better leave them alone now … You and I could drop in at the Chabanais before we go home …" That suggestion appealed to Sophie, because while still in Prague she had often heard people talking about the Chabanais, and she was delighted at the thought of trying the Chabanais and judging for herself. But then we figured that considering the amount of money we had brought with us, the Chabanais would be too expensive. We'd just have to try and revive our interest in the carnival. While we were in the Caterpillar, Robinson must have had a scene with Madelon. They were both in a foul humor when they got out. You really couldn't have touched her with a ten-foot pole that evening. To smooth things over I suggested an absorbing amusement?

fishing for bottlenecks. Madelon accepted sulkily. Even so she beat us all hollow. She got her ring just over the cork and slipped it on just before the bell rang. Click! And that was that. The stand owner couldn't get over it. He gave her a half bottle of Grand-Due de Malvoison. 93] Just to give you an idea of how skillful she was. But it didn't make her happy. Right away she announced that she wouldn't drink it. "It's no good," she said. So Robinson uncorked the bottle and drank it. Down the hatch! At one gulp. A funny thing for him to do, because he practically never drank.

Then we came to the tin wedding. Biff! Bang! We all had a try with hard balls. It's depressing how clumsy I am at these things … I congratulate Robinson. He beats me at any game. But not even his skill could make him smile. They both looked as if we were leading them off to slaughter. We tried hard, but nothing could put any life into them. "This is a carnival!" I yelled at them. For once I was completely out of ideas. My shouting things in their ears and trying to cheer them up didn't mean a thing to them. They didn't even hear me. "What about youth?" I asked them. "What are we going to do about it? … Has youth stopped making merry? Look at me, ten years older than the rest of you! All right, sweetheart, what do you say?" He and Madelon looked at me as if I were drunk, gassed, nuts, and there was no point in even answering me … no point in trying to speak to me, because I'd certainly be incapable of understanding anything they could say … I wouldn't understand a thing … maybe they're right, I said to myself, looking anxiously at the people around us.

But all those people were doing the things you do to have fun, they weren't nursing their little troubles like us. Far from it. They were getting something out of the carnival. A franc's worth here! … Fifty centimes'

worth there! … Lights! Music, spiel, and candy … They were buzzing around like flies, scads of them, with their little grubs in their arms, livid, pasty-faced babies, so pale in the glaring light that you could hardly see them. Just around their noses those babies had a bit of pink, in the area for colds and getting kissed. Among all the stands I immediately recognized the Gallery of the Nations … A memory, I didn't mention it to the others.?That makes fifteen years that have gone by … A long time … And what a lot of friends I've lost along the way! I'd never have thought the Gallery of the Nations could drag itself out of the mud it was sunk in out there in SaintCloud … But now it was all refurbished, as good as new, with music and everything. You gotta hand it to them. And all these people shooting. A shooting gallery always does business. And the egg was back again like me, there in the middle, supported by practically nothing, bobbing up and down. It cost two francs. We passed it by, we were too cold to try, it was best to keep moving. But not because we were short of change, our pockets were still full of change, our little pocket music.

I'd have tried anything just then to put some life into us, but no one was doing a thing to help. If Parapine had been with us, it would probably have been worse, seeing how gloomy he was with people. Luckily he'd stayed home to look after the loonies. I was sorry I'd come. Then Madelon started laughing after all, but there was nothing funny about her laugh. Robinson, who was beside her, snickered so as not to be different. Then Sophie started making jokes. That was all we needed.

As we were passing the photographer's booth, he noticed our hesitation. We had no great desire to go in, except Sophie maybe. But a moment later, thanks to our hesitation, we were at the mercy of his camera. He drawled out his commands, and we submitted on the cardboard bridge?he must have built it himself?of a purported ship, *La Belle France*. The name was written on imitation life belts. We stood there for quite some time, staring straight ahead, challenging the future. Other customers were waiting impatiently for us to come down off the bridge, and already they were avenging themselves for having to wait by not only finding us too ugly for words, but telling us so out loud.

They thought they could take advantage of our not being able to move. But they couldn't faze Madelon, she slanged them back with the full force of her Southern accent. She could be heard for miles around. She told them where to get off!

A magnesium flash. We all flinch. We each get a picture. We're even uglier than before. The rain comes through the canvas roof. Our feet are footsore and frozen stiff. The wind had found holes all over us while we were posing, so much so that there's hardly anything left of my overcoat.

All we can do is keep walking among the booths. I didn't dare suggest going back to Vigny. It was too early. Our teeth were already chattering with the cold and the heart-throb organ of the merry-go-round jangled our nerves till we were shivering even more. The end of the whole world?that's what the damned organ is laughing about. It bellows its message of disaster through its silver-plated kazoos, and the tune goes out to die in the environing darkness, along the pissy streets that come down from Montmartre.

The little housemaids from Brittany are definitely coughing a lot more than they did last winter when they'd just arrived in Paris. Their green-and-blue mottled thighs do their best to decorate the flanks of the wooden horses. The boys from Auvergne, who treat them to their rides, are cautious post-office clerks and, as everyone knows, never lay them without a rubber. They have no desire to catch it a second time. In expectation of love, the housemaids squirm and wiggle in the disgustingly melodious din of the merry-go-round. They're kind of sick to their stomachs, but that doesn't stop them from posing in the freezing cold, because this is the great moment, the time to try their youthful charms on the definitive lover, who may be there, already smitten, tucked away among the yokels in this frozen crowd. Love is still hanging back … but it'll come, same as it does in the movies, and happiness with it. If the rich man's son loves you for just one evening, he'll never leave you … It's been known to happen, and it's good enough. Naturally he's sweet, and naturally he's handsome, and naturally he's rich.

The old woman who keeps the newsstand over by the Métro doesn't give a damn about the future, she scratches her old conjunctivitis and slowly festers her eyes with her fingernails. An obscure pleasure that costs nothing. It's been going on for six years now, and her itching gets worse and worse.

Strollers, driven into groups by the bitter cold, gather around the lottery booth. A brazier of rear ends. They can't get in. So quickly, to warm themselves, they run, they bound into the knot of people across the way, waiting to get in to see the two-headed calf. Under cover of the urinal, a young candidate for unemployment quotes his price to a provincial couple flushed with excitement. The morals cop knows what's going on, but he doesn't care, his assignment at the moment is the entrance to the Café Miseux. He's been watching the Café Miseux for a week. The instigator must operate in the tobacco shop or in the backroom of the feelthy bookshop next door. Anyway it was reported long ago. Either one or the other of them, it seems, procures underage girls, who appear to be selling flowers. Anonymous letters again. The chestnut vendor on the corner

does a bit of informing too. He has to. Everything that's on the sidewalk belongs to the police. That machine-gun kind of, that you hear over there, shooting in crazy short bursts, is only the guy who runs the "Wheel of Death" on his motorcycle. An escaped convict, so they say, but I'm not sure. Anyway, he has crashed through his tent twice in this same spot and once a couple of years ago in Toulouse. Why can't he and his contraption smash up for good! Why can't he break his neck and spinal column once and for all! That noise would put anybody in a temper! The same goes for the streetcar with its bell, in less than a month it's killed two old folks in Bicętre, hugging the walls of the shanties. The bus on the other hand is quiet, it pulls up slowly on the Place Pigalle, taking every possible precaution, staggering a little, blowing its horn, all out of breath, with its four passengers, who get off as slowly and carefully as choir boys.

Strolling from booth to booth, from clump to clump of humanity, from merry-go-rounds to lotteries, we'd come to the end of the carnival, to the big dark vacant lot where the families go to pee … Nothing to do but turn back. Retracing our steps, we ate chestnuts to work up a thirst. We got sore mouths but no thirst. There was a worm in the chestnuts, a cute little fellow. Naturally it was Madelon who got it. That was exactly when things started going really badly between us. Up until then we had kept ourselves more or less under control, but that worm really made her furious.

As she was going over to the gutter to spit out the worm, Léon said something to stop her, I don't remember what he said or what had got into him, but all of a sudden her going over to spit went against Robinson's grain. Like a damn fool he asked her if she'd found a seed in it … Honestly, that was no question to ask her … And then Sophie sees fit to join in their argument … She couldn't see what they were fighting about … She wanted to know. Being interrupted by Sophie, a foreigner, exasperated them even more, what would you expect? Just then a bunch of hoodlums come between us, and we're separated. Actually they were young fellows trying to pick up customers, but with mimicry, kazoos, and assorted cries of terror. When we managed to get back together, she and Robinson were still fighting.

"It looks like time to go home," I thought … "If we leave them here together for another few minutes, they'll disgrace us right here in the middle of the carnival … Better call it a day …" The whole thing had been a failure, you couldn't deny it. "Let's go home," I suggested to Robinson. He gave me a look of surprise, but it still struck me as the wisest, most sensible course. "Haven't you had enough?" I added. He made a sign meaning that I should ask Madelon how she felt about it. I had no objection to asking Madelon, but I didn't think it was a very bright thing to do.

"We'll take Madelon with us," I finally said.

"Take her?" he asked. "Where do you want to take her?"

"To Vigny, of course," I said.

That was a blunder. I'd done it again. But once I'd said it, I couldn't take it back.

"We have an empty room for her in Vigny," I went on. "There's no shortage of rooms out there! … We could all have a bite to eat before going to bed … At least it'll be more cheerful than freezing around here, like we've been doing for the last two hours … No trouble at all …" Madelon made no answer to my suggestions. She didn't even look at me while I was speaking, but I know she hadn't missed a word of what I'd said. Anyway, I'd said it and it couldn't be helped.

Then when I'd wandered a few steps away from the group, she came over to me quietly and asked if I wasn't trying to put something over on her, inviting her out to Vigny. I didn't answer her. No sense trying to reason with a jealous woman. Anything I could say would only be a pretext for another endless scene. Besides I didn't even know whom or what she was jealous of. It's often hard to localize feelings of jealousy. Come to think of it, she was probably jealous of everything, same as everyone else.

By that time Sophie didn't know where she was at, but she went on trying to be agreeable. She even took Madelon's arm, but Madelon was much too furious and much too glad to be furious to let herself be diverted by friendly gestures. We fought our way through the crowd to the streetcar stop on the Place Clichy. Just as we were about to board a car, a cloud burst right over the square, and the rain came down in cascades. The heavens emptied.

In half a second every taxi in sight had been grabbed. I heard Madelon right near me asking Robinson in an undertone: "You're not going to insult me in front of all these people? … Are you, Léon?" She was in bad shape. "You're sick of me, aren't you? Why don't you say so?" she went on. "Say you've had enough of me … That you'd rather be alone with these two … You all go to bed together, I bet, when I'm not there, don't you? … Say you like it better with them than with me … Go on, say it so I can hear you …" After that she stood

silent, her face contracted into a grimace around her nose, which pointed upward and tugged at her mouth. We were waiting on the sidewalk. “You see how your friends treat me?” she started in again. “You see, Léon?”

Léon, I have to give him credit, didn’t answer back, he didn’t do anything to provoke her, he could be very violent at times, but he just looked the other way at the house fronts and the boulevard and the cars.

And yet Léon had his violent moments. When she saw she wasn’t getting anywhere with threats, she came back at him in a different way, with love talk, while we were all waiting.

“I love you, Léon, hear, I love you … Do you realize at least what I’ve done for you? … Maybe I shouldn’t have come today … but you do love me just a little, don’t you? You must love me just a little … You have a heart, haven’t you, tell me, Léon, tell me you have a heart … Then why do you despise my love? … We had a beautiful dream, the two of us together … And now you’re so cruel to me! … You’ve trampled my dream, Léon! … You’ve soiled it! … You’ve destroyed my ideal, you can’t say different … I suppose you don’t want me to believe in love anymore … Is that it? And now you want me to go away for good … Is that what you want? …” All these questions while the rain was dripping through the awning of the café.

It was coming down on us all. He had warned me all right, she was exactly the way he had said. He hadn’t made anything up. I’d never have thought them capable of rising to such an emotional paroxysm in so little time.

Seeing the cars and all were making so much noise, I was able to whisper a few words in Robinson’s ear. I suggested that we try to run out on her and get this shindig over with as quickly as possible, because it was a flop and we’d better break up quietly before the situation soured in earnest and people got really angry as there was good reason to fear.

“You want me to find you a pretext?” I whispered. “Then we’ll all beat it separately?” “No!” he answered. “Don’t do that! Don’t! She’s capable of throwing a fit right here and we’d never be able to stop her!” I let it go at that. Come to think of it, maybe Robinson enjoyed being yelled at in public, and besides he knew her better than I did. As the shower was letting up, we found a taxi. We jumped in, and there we were all squeezed together inside. First we didn’t say a word to each other. The air was too heavy between us and I felt I’d put my foot in it enough. I thought I’d better wait a while before doing it again.

Léon and I took the folding seats, the two women sat in back. On weekend nights the road to Argenteuil is badly congested, especially as far as the Porte. After that you have to count a good hour before you get to Vigny, on account of the traffic. It’s no fun sitting face to face and eye to eye without saying a word, especially when it’s dark and everyone’s kind of suspicious of everyone else.

Even so, if we had stayed like that, nettled, but keeping each to himself, nothing would have happened. That’s still my opinion when I think of it today.

It was my doing, I have to admit, that we started talking again and the quarrel resumed, worse than ever. We’re never suspicious enough of words, they look like nothing much, not at all dangerous, just little puffs of air, little sounds the mouth makes, neither hot nor cold and easily absorbed, once they reach the ear, by the vast gray boredom of the brain. We’re not suspicious enough of words, and calamity strikes.

Certain words are hidden in with the rest, like stones. They’re not very noticeable, but before long they make all the life that’s in us tremble, every bit of it in its weakness and its strength … The outcome is panic … An avalanche … You’re left dangling like a hanged man, over a sea of emotion … A tempest comes and goes, much too powerful for you, so violent you’d never have thought mere emotions could lead to anything like it … I therefore conclude that we’re never suspicious enough of words. But now let me tell you what happened: The taxi was slowly following a streetcar, because the road was being repaired … “Hum … hum” went the motor. A pothole every hundred yards … But the streetcar up ahead of us wasn’t enough for me. Always childish and talkative, I was impatient. The snail’s pace and the indecision all around me were more than I could bear … So, quick, I shattered the silence like a piggy bank to see what might be inside. I watched, or rather, since by then you could hardly see, I tried to watch Madelon in the left-hand corner of the cab. She kept her face turned toward the outside, toward the landscape, toward the darkness would be more like it. I noted with annoyance that she was as stubborn as ever. I, on the other hand, acted like a regular pest. Just to make her turn her head my way, I spoke to her.

“Look, Madelon. Maybe you’ve got some idea how we could amuse ourselves, but you’re afraid to tell us? Would you like us to stop somewhere before we go home? Come on, tell us! …”

“Amuse ourselves! Amuse ourselves!” she said, as if I’d insulted her. “All you people think of is amusing yourselves …” Then she let out a whole barrage of sighs, deep and so touching that I’ve seldom heard the like.

“I’m doing my best,” I said. “It’s Sunday.”

“How about you, Léon?” she asked him. “Are you doing your best too?” Straight from the shoulder.

“Are you kidding!” was his comeback.

I looked at them both when we passed a streetlamp. What I saw was anger. Madelon leaned foward as if to kiss him. It was written that no one would miss a chance to put his foot in it that night.

The taxi had slowed down again because of the trucks that were strung out all along the road. It exasperated him to be kissed, and he pushed her away, rather roughly, I must say. Of course that wasn’t a nice thing to do, especially in front of us. When we came to the end of the Avenue Clichy, to the Porte, night had fallen, the lights were going on in the shops. Under the railroad bridge, in spite of the echo that’s always so loud, I could still hear her asking: “Don’t you want to kiss me, Léon?” She kept at him. He still didn’t answer. So then she turned to me and harangued me directly. The affront was too much for her.

“What have you done to Léon to make him so mean? Tell me this minute! … What kind of stories have you been telling him?” That’s the way she lit into me.

“Nothing at all,” I told her. “I haven’t told him anything! … Your quarrels are no concern of mine!”

The worst of it was that it was true, I hadn’t said anything to Léon about her. He was free, it was up to him whether he stayed with her or left her. It was none of my business, but it was no use trying to tell her that, she had stopped listening to reason. Again we fell silent, sitting face to face in the cab, but the air was so charged with fury that it couldn’t go on for long. She had spoken to me in a thin sort of voice I’d never heard her use before, the monotonous voice of a person whose mind is fully made up. Scrunched up as she was in the corner of the cab, I couldn’t see her movements anymore, and that troubled me. All that time Sophie had been holding my hand. With these goings on the poor kid didn’t know what to do with herself.

Right after Saint-Ouen Madelon resumed her catalog of grievances against Léon. In longwinded frenzy she asked him questions and more questions, now at the top of her lungs: Did he love her, had he been faithful, and so on. For the two of us, Sophie and me, it was hopelessly embarrassing. But she was so excited she didn’t care at all whether we were listening or not. If anything she welcomed it. On the other hand, it hadn’t been very bright of me to shut her up with us in that box … every word resounded and, with her character, that made her want to put on a big act for our benefit. The taxi had been another of my brainstorms.

Léon had stopped reacting. He was tired after the evening we’d spent together, and he was always a little short of sleep, he’d always had that trouble.

“For God’s sake calm down,” I managed to shout at Madelon. “The two of you can have it out when we get there … You’ll have plenty of time!”

“Get there! Get there!” she said in a tone that would make your hair stand on end. “We’ll never get there, I tell you! … And anyway,” she went on, “I’m sick of your dirty nasty ways … I’m a decent girl … I’m better than the whole lot of you together! … Pigs! … You can’t make a fool out of me! … You can’t understand a girl like me, you’re not good enough … You’re too rotten the whole lot of you to understand someone like me! … You’ll never understand anything that’s clean and beautiful!”

In sum, she attacked us in our self-esteem. She went on and on. I kept strictly quiet on my folding seat, I didn’t so much as let out a murmur. But it did no good, every time the driver shifted gears she’d start yapping again. At times like that the least little thing can provoke disaster. Just making us miserable seemed to be giving her a big kick, she followed out her nature to the bitter end, she couldn’t help it.

“Don’t imagine you’re going to get off so easy!” she threatened us. “That you’re going to get rid of me on the quiet! Oh no! I may as well tell you right away! No, you won’t get away with it! You no-good scum! … You’ve ruined my life! I’ll wake you up, you bastards!”

Suddenly she bent over toward Robinson, grabbed him by the lapels of his overcoat, and started shaking him. He made no attempt to break loose. You wouldn’t catch me interfering. It almost looked as if Robinson enoyed seeing her getting more and more excited on account of him. He was grinning, it wasn’t natural. She was yelling at him, and he was jerking back and forth on his seat like a marionette, nose down, all the starch gone out of his neck.

Just as I was going to attempt some little gesture of remonstrance to stop the rough stuff, she bristled and started giving me a piece of her mind … Unloading things she’d been storing up for a long time … I was in for

it all right. And there in front of everybody. “You shut up, you lecher!” she screams at me. “This is between Léon and me, and it’s none of your business! I’m not having any more of your brutality! If you ever again lift a finger against me, Madelon will teach you how to behave! … First you cuckold your friends, then you beat their women! … Of all the blasted nerve! Aren’t you ashamed of yourself?” Hearing these truths, Léon kind of woke up a bit. He wasn’t grinning any more. For a second I even wondered if he and I weren’t going to bash each other to kingdom come, but for one thing, with four of us packed into that cab, there wasn’t room enough for a fight. That reassured me. Too cramped.

Especially since we were making pretty good time over the cobblestones of the boulevards along the Seine. The taxi was jolting so bad you couldn’t even move.

“Come, Léon,” she commanded him. “I’m asking you for the last time, come! Drop these people! Do you hear what I’m saying?” A riot!

“Make him stop, Léon! Stop the car, or I’ll stop it myself!” But Léon didn’t stir from his seat. He was screwed on tight.

“So you won’t come?” she said again. “You won’t come?” She’d warned me that I’d better lie low. I’d had enough. “Are you coming?” she repeated. The cab was still going fast, the road was clear in front of us, and the jolting was worse than ever. We were bouncing around like crates in a truck.

“All right!” she concluded when he didn’t answer. “All right, that does it! You asked for it!

Tomorrow! You hear, no later than tomorrow, I’m going to the police and telling them exactly how Madame Henrouille fell down the stairs! Do you hear me now, Léon? … You happy now? … Not playing deaf anymore? Either you come with me right away or I go to the police tomorrow morning! … So are you coming or aren’t you? Speak up!” She couldn’t have made her threat any plainer.

So then he decided to say something after all.

“You were involved in it yourself,” he said. “You can’t say a thing …” That didn’t quiet her in the least, far from it. “I don’t care!” she said. “What if I was? You mean we’ll both go to jail? … That I was your accomplice? … Is that what you mean? … Well, that suits me fine! …”

And she started laughing hysterically, as if nothing could have been funnier …

“That would suit me to a T, I tell you! I’m crazy about jail, I tell you! … Don’t go expecting me to back down because of your jail talk! … I’ll go to jail any time you say! … … But you’ll go too, you bastard! … At least you won’t be able to give me the run-around any longer! … I belong to you, okay! But you belong to me too! You should just have stayed with me down there! I can only love once, Monsieur! I’m no tart!” In saying that she was defying me and Sophie too. Making a point of fidelity and respectability.

In spite of it all the taxi was driving on, and he still made no move to stop the driver.

“Then you’re not coming? You’d rather go to the pen? Okay! … You don’t care if I turn you in? … You don’t care if I love you or not? … You don’t care about my future? You don’t care about anything, do you? …”

“No,” he says. “In a way you’re right … But it’s not just you … I don’t care about anyone else either … Christ, don’t take it as an insult! … I know you’re a sweet kid … But I don’t want to be loved anymore … It disgusts me! …”

She didn’t expect to have that kind of thing thrown in her face … She was so surprised that she didn’t know how to pick up the tirade she’d already begun. She’d been thrown off balance, but she recovered quick enough. “Oh! It disgusts you, does it? … What do you mean by that? … Tell me a little more, you ungrateful weasel!”

“No!” he said. “It’s not you that disgusts me, it’s everything. I don’t want anything … You can’t hold that against me …”

“What’s that you say? Say it again! Me … everything?” She was trying to understand.

“Me, everything? Don’t talk Chinese! … Tell me in French, in front of these people. Why do I disgust you now? Don’t you get a hard-on like everybody else, you big pig, when you make love? Oh, so you don’t get a hard-on, is that it? … Out with it! … In front of these people … Tell us you don’t get a hard-on!”

In spite of her fury, her way of arguing her case made you want to laugh. But I didn’t have time to laugh very

long, because she started up again. “And him there! I suppose he doesn’t squirt every time he catches me in a corner! The beast! The sex fiend! I dare him to say it’s not true! … You’re all looking for something new! … Admit it! … Variety, novelty! That’s what you want! A daisy chain! Why not a virgin! You degenerate pigs! Why look for pretexts? … You’re jaded, that’s all. You haven’t even got the courage of your vices!

You’re scared of your vices!”

At that point Robinson took it on himself to answer. By that time he, too, had lost his temper, and he shouted as loud as she had.

“Wrong!” he shouted. “I’ve got plenty of courage, as much as you! … Only, if you want the whole truth … everything, absolutely everything! disgusts me and turns my stomach!

Not just you! … Everything! … And love most of all! … Yours as much as anyone else’s! … The sentimental tripe you dish out … Want me to tell you what I think of it? I think it’s like making love in the crapper! Do you get me now? … All the sentiment you trot out to make me stick with you hits me like an insult, if you want to know … And to make it worse, you don’t even realize it, you’re the one that’s rotten because you don’t understand! … You’re satisfied repeating the rubbish other people say … You think it makes sense … People have told you there’s nothing better than love, they’ve told you it’ll go down with everybody, everywhere and always, and that’s good enough for you … Well, I say fuck their love! … You hear? … Their putrid love doesn’t go down with me … not anymore! … You’ve missed the train! You’re too late! It won’t go down anymore, and that’s that! … What a stupid thing to get steamed up about! … Why do you have to make love, considering all the things that are happening? … All the things we see around us! … Or are you blind? … More likely you just don’t give a damn! You wallow in sentiment when you’re a worse brute than anybody … You want to eat rotten meat? … With love sauce? … Does that help it down? … Not with me! … If you don’t smell anything, it’s your hard luck! Maybe your nose is stuffed up! If it doesn’t disgust you, it’s because you’re stupid, the whole lot of you … You want to know what it is that comes between you and me? … All right, I’ll tell you! A whole life is what comes between you and me … Isn’t that enough for you?”

“My house is clean!” she comes back at him. “A person can be poor but clean, can’t they?

When did you ever see that my house wasn’t clean? Is that what you’re insinuating with your nasty remarks? … My rear end is clean, Monsieur! … Maybe you can’t say as much for yourself! … Nor your feet neither!”

“I never said that, Madelon! I never said anything like that! … About your house not being clean! … You see that you don’t understand a thing!” That was all he could think of saying to calm her down.

“So now you say you haven’t said anything? You haven’t said anything, have you? Would you listen to him! He insults me worse than garbage and then he claims he hasn’t said anything! You’d have to kill him to make him stop lying! Jail isn’t bad enough for a skunk like him! A lousy rotten pimp! … It’s not enough! What he needs is the guillotine!” Nothing could stop her. I couldn’t make anything of what they were saying in that taxi. All I could hear was curses and insults in with the roar of the motor and the sloshing of the wheels in the wind and rain that came beating against our door in ferocious gusts. The air between us was charged with threats. “It’s vile! …” she said several times. She couldn’t say anything else. “It’s vile!” And then she raised the stakes, double or quits. “You coming?” she said. “You coming, Léon? One … You coming? Two …” She waited.

“Three? … So you’re not coming? …” “No,” he said, without moving an inch. He even added: “Do what you like!” That was an answer of sorts.

She must have moved back a little on the seat, as far as she could go. I guess she was holding the revolver in both hands, because when the shot went off it seemed to go straight into his belly. Then, almost at the same time, there were two more shots, one after the other … and then the car was full of acrid smoke.

But we kept right on going. Robinson slumped down on me, sideways, jerking and gasping: “Hep! Hep!” And more of the same: “Hep! Hep!” The driver must have heard. First he slowed down a little to see what had happened. Then finally he stopped right under a gas lamp.

The moment he opened the door, Madelon gave him a violent push and jumped out. She scrambled down the embankment and beat it across the fields in the darkness, right through the mud. I tried to call her back, but she was already far away.

I didn’t quite know what to do with my wounded man … In a way it might have been wisest to take him back to Paris … But by then we weren’t far from our place … The townspeople wouldn’t know what was going on … So Sophie and I bundled him up in overcoats and settled him in the corner where Madelon had fired her

shots. “Take it easy!” I said to the driver. But he kept driving much too fast. He was in a hurry. The bumps made Robinson groan still worse.

When we pulled up in front of the rest home, the driver didn’t even want to give us his name, he was worried about trouble with the police, having to testify and all that … He also said there were sure to be bloodstains on the cushions. He wanted to beat it right away without waiting. But I’d taken his number.

Two bullets had gone into Robinson’s gut, maybe three, I wasn’t quite sure yet how many. She had fired straight in front of her, I’d seen that. The wounds weren’t bleeding. Though Sophie and I were holding him up between us, he got a bad shaking and his head was wobbling. He spoke, but it was hard to understand him. He was already delirious. “Hep!

Hep!” he kept chanting. He’d have time enough to die before we got there. The street had been freshly paved. As soon as we came to our gate, I sent the concierge to get Parapine from his room in a hurry. He came down right away, and he and a male nurse helped us carry Robinson to his bed. Once we’d undressed him we were able to examine him and palpate the wall of his abdomen. It was already distended, and soft in places. I found two holes practically on top of each other, but no third; one of the bullets must have gone astray.

If I had been in Leon’s place, I’d have preferred an internal hemorrhage, it floods the abdomen and doesn’t take long. The peritoneum fills up, and that’s the end. With peritonitis on the other hand an infection sets in, and it takes forever.

It was still too soon to tell how he’d go about dying. His belly was swelling up, he was staring at us, his eyes were already set, he was groaning, but not very much. He was having a sort of calm spell. I’d already seen him very sick in a lot of different places, but this time everything was different, his moans and his eyes and everything. It looked as if we couldn’t hold him much longer, he was slipping away from minute to minute. He was sweating big drops that made it look as if his whole face were crying. At times like that you’re sorry you’ve become as poor and as hard as you have. We’re short of practically everything we’d need to help someone die. All we have left inside is the things that are useful in our everyday life, a life of comfort, a life all for ourselves, a life of viciousness. We’ve lost our confidence along the way. We’ve harried and goaded what pity we had left, driven it to the bottom of our body like some nasty pill. We’ve pushed pity to the bottom of our bowels along with our shit. That’s a good place for it, we say to ourselves. I stayed with Léon to commiserate, I had never felt so embarrassed. I couldn’t manage it … He couldn’t find me … it was driving him wild … He must have been looking for another Ferdinand, somebody much bigger than me, to help him die more easily. He was straining to figure out if there’d been any progress in the world … Poor fellow … Drawing up an inventory in his mind … Wondering if people hadn’t changed just a little for the better during his lifetime, if maybe he had been unfair to them without meaning to … But there was only me, just me, me all alone, beside him, the genuine Ferdinand, who was short of everything that would make a man bigger than his own bare life, short of love for other people’s lives. Of that I had none, or so little there was no use showing it. I wasn’t as big as death. I was a lot smaller. I had no great opinion of humanity. I think I’d have found it easier to grieve for a dying dog than for Robinson, because a dog isn’t tricky, and Robinson, in spite of everything, was tricky in a way. I was tricky myself, we were all tricksters… . Our other qualities had left us along the way, I’d even lost the grimaces that can come in handy over deathbeds, I’d lost everything along the way, I couldn’t find any of what we need to help a man die, all I could find was cunning. My feelings were like a house where you only go on holidays. Scarcely inhabitable. Besides, a dying man is demanding. Dying isn’t enough for him. He has to get a kick out of it … At the very bottom of life, with his arteries already full of urea, he has to get a kick out of his last gasps. And the dying snivel, because they’re not having as much fun as before … They make demands … they protest. The dramatics of misery wants to carry over from life into death. He came partly to his senses when Parapine gave him his injection of morphine. He even talked a little about what had happened. “It’s best to have it end like this,” he said. And later:

“It doesn’t hurt as much as I’d have thought.” When Parapine asked him exactly where the pain was, you could see he wasn’t all there anymore, but even so there were still things he wanted to tell us … He hadn’t the strength, his head wasn’t clear enough … He wept, he gagged, and a moment later he laughed. He wasn’t like the usual sick man, we didn’t know how to act in front of him.

It looked as if he were trying to help us live. As if he’d been trying to find us pleasures to go on living for. He held us by the hands. One hand each. I kissed him. That’s all you can do in a case like that without going wrong. We waited. He didn’t say anything more after that. A little later, maybe an hour, the hemorrhage came, internal and profuse. It carried him off.

His heart started beating faster and faster, and then very very fast. His heart was running after his exhausted, diminished blood, chasing it to the ends of his blood vessels, throbbing in his fingertips. The pallor rose up from his neck and took hold of his whole face. He died in a choking fit. He went as if he had taken a running

start, squeezing the two of us in his arms.

Then, almost immediately, he was back again in front of us, already taking on the weight of a dead man.

We stood up. We disengaged ourselves from his hands. They stopped in mid-air, stiff, yellow, and blue in the light of the lamp.

Then Robinson was like a stranger in the room, someone who had come from a horrible country and you wouldn't have dared speak to.

Parapine kept his wits about him. He managed to send someone to the police station for a cop. The cop just happened to be Gustave, our Gustave, who was on stand-by after his traffic duty.

"OhmyGod!" said Gustave when he entered the room and saw Robinson. Then he sat down at the nurses' table that hadn't been cleared yet to get his breath and take a little drink. "Seeing it's a crime," he said, "we'd better take him to headquarters." Then he remarked: "Robinson was all right, he wouldn't have hurt a fly. I wonder why she killed him …" Then he drank some more. He shouldn't have. Drink didn't agree with him. But he liked the bottle. It was his weakness.

We went up to the storeroom to get a stretcher. By then it was too late to disturb the staff, so we decided to carry the body to the police station ourselves. It was far away, at the other end of town, after the grade crossing, the last house.

We started out. Parapine held the front of the stretcher, Gustave Mandamour the other end. But neither of them walked very straight. Going down the little stairway, Sophie had to steady them a bit. It was then I noticed that she didn't seem terribly upset. Yet it had happened right beside her, so close that one of that madwoman's bullets could have gone right into her. But Sophie, as I'd noticed on other occasions, needed time to get her emotions started. Not that she was cold. When it hit her, it was like a ton of bricks, but she needed time.

I wanted to follow the body a little way to make sure it was really over. But instead of actually following as I should have, I veered from side to side of the road and finally, after passing the big school building near the grade crossing, I slipped into a side street that leads down to the Seine, first sloping gently between hedges and then taking a steep plunge. Over the fences I saw them moving off with their stretcher.

They looked as if they'd suffocate in the sheets of mist that slowly closed behind them. Along the riverbank the current was driving hard against the barges, which had been wedged tight as a precaution against the flood water. More cold came from the Gennevilliers plain, in puffs of mist that spread over the swirling river and made the water glisten under the arches.

Down there in the distance lay the sea. But there was no more room in me for imaginings about the sea. I had other things to do. I had tried to lose myself, I hadn't wanted to be face to face with my own life anymore, but everywhere I kept finding it. I was always coming back to myself. My wanderings were over. No more knocking about for me … The world had closed in … We had come to the end! Like at the carnival! It's not enough to be sad; there ought to be some way to start the music up again and go looking for more sadness … But not for me … We may not admit it, but what we really want is to have our youth back again … We ought to be ashamed … Anyway, I wasn't prepared to endure any more! … Yet I hadn't gone as far in life as Robinson! … All in all, I hadn't succeeded … I hadn't conceived even one good, sound idea, like his idea of getting himself bumped off … That idea was bigger than my big head, bigger than all the fear that was in it, a fine, a magnificent idea to die with … How many lives would I need to make myself an idea more powerful than anything in the world? No saying. A flop! My ideas went rattling around in my head with lots of space between them. They were like faint, flickering little candles, trembling throughout a lifetime in the middle of a ghostly, abominable universe. Maybe things were a little better than twenty years ago, nobody could say that I hadn't made a wee beginning of progress, but there seemed no possibility of my ever managing, like Robinson, to fill my head with one single idea, but that one superb, a thought far stronger than death, and of my succeeding, just with my idea, of exuding joy, carefreeness, and courage wherever I went. A scrumptious hero!

I'd be brimful of courage then. I'd be dripping with courage, and life itself would be just one big idea of courage, that would be the driving force behind everything, behind all men and things from earth to heaven. And by the same token there would be so much love that Death would be shut up inside it with tenderness, and Death would be so cosy-comfortable in there, the bitch, that she'd finally start enjoying herself, she'd get pleasure out of love along with everyone else. How wonderful that would be! What a production! I was laughing to myself all alone on the riverbank, when I thought of all the things I'd have to do if I wanted to

inflate myself like that with infinite resolutions … An idealistic toad! Fever, you know.

My friends had been looking for me for at least an hour. Especially because they'd noticed that I wasn't in very good shape when I left them … Gustave Mandamour was the first to sight me under my gas lamp. "Hey, doctor!" he shouted. Mandamour, I can assure you, had some voice! "This way! They want you at the police station. They want your deposition. You know, doctor," he added, but now he was whispering in my ear, "you're not looking well." He walked beside me, in fact he held me up. Gustave was fond of me. I never found fault with him for his drinking. I was full of understanding. Whereas Parapine was rather severe and sometimes made him feel ashamed of himself for drinking so much. Gustave would have done practically anything for me. He admired me in fact. He told me so. He didn't know why. Neither did I. But he admired me. He was the only one. We went down two or three streets together until we saw the lantern outside the police station. After that you couldn't go wrong. Gustave was worrying about the report he'd have to write. He didn't dare tell me so. He'd already made everyone sign at the bottom, but a lot of things were still missing from his report.

Gustave had a big head. Like me. I could actually wear his kepi, which goes to show, but he tended to forget details. Ideas didn't come easy to him, it cost him a struggle to speak and even more to write. Parapine would have been glad to help him write his report, but he hadn't seen the crime, he didn't know the circumstances. He'd have had to invent, and the inspector didn't want any inventions in his reports, he wanted nothing but the truth, so he said.

Climbing the stairway at the police station, I was shivering. I couldn't tell the inspector much either. I really wasn't feeling so good.

They'd put Robinson's body down beside the rows of big filing cabinets. All around the benches the floor was littered with printed matter and cigarette butts. On the wall the inscription "Fuck the Fuzz" was only partly erased.

"Did you get lost, doctor?" the secretary asked me, quite amiably I must say, when I finally got there. We were all so tired we couldn't really talk straight.

Finally we were agreed about the phrasing and the trajectory of the bullets, one of which was still embedded in the spinal column. It hadn't been found. He'd be buried with it. They looked for the other bullets. The other bullets were embedded in the wall of the taxi. It was a powerful revolver.

Sophie came and joined us. She'd gone back for my overcoat. She kissed me and pressed me close to her, as if I were going to die too or fly away. "I'm not going away," I kept saying. "Be reasonable, Sophie, I'm not going away." Nothing I said could set her mind at rest.

Standing around the stretcher, we chewed the fat with the inspector's secretary, who'd seen worse in his time, crimes and noncrimes and disasters, and he wanted to tell us about all his experiences in one breath. We didn't dare leave for fear of offending him. He was so affable. It gave him pleasure to be talking with educated people for a change instead of thugs. We didn't want to hurt his feelings, so we hung around.

Parapine had no raincoat. Listening to us lulled Gustave's mind. His mouth hung open, and his thick neck was thrust out as if he was pulling a hand cart. I hadn't heard Parapine pour out so many words for many years, not since my student days, to tell the truth. All the things that had happened that day went to his head. But we decided to go home all the same.

We took Mandamour with us and Sophie too. Now and then she gave me a hug, her body was filled with the strength of worry and tenderness, and so was her heart. Her strength was all over her, it was wonderful. I, too, was full of her strength. That bothered me … it wasn't mine, and it was my own I'd need if I were to go and die magnificently one day, like Léon. I had no time to waste on grimaces. To work! I said to myself. But nothing came of it.

She even wanted me to go back and look at the corpse again. So I left without turning around. A sign said: "Close the door." Parapine was thirsty. From talking, no doubt. From talking too much for him. Passing the bistrot by the canal, we knocked on the shutters for a while. It made me think of the road to Noirceur during the war. The same little light over the door, on the point of going out. Finally the owner in person came and opened. He hadn't heard anything. We told him all the news, ending up with the murder. "A crime of passion!" Gustave called it.

The bar opened just before dawn for the benefit of the bargemen. As the night draws to an end, the locks open slowly. And then the whole countryside comes to life and starts to work. Slowly the banks break away from the river and rise up on both sides. Work emerges from the darkness. You begin to see it again, all very simple

and hard. Over here the winches, over there the fences around the work sites, and far away on the road men are coming from still farther away. In small chilled groups they move into the murky light. For a starter they splatter their faces with daylight as they walk past the dawn. All you can see of them is their pale, simple faces … the rest still belongs to the night. They, too, will all have to die some day. How will they go about it?

They move toward the bridge. Then little by little they vanish across the plain, and other men come along, paler and paler as the light rises all around them. What are they thinking about?

The owner of the bar wanted to know all about the tragedy. He wanted us to tell him everything.

Vaudescal was the owner's name; he was from the North and very clean. Gustave gave him an earful.

Gustave kept chewing over the details. But that wasn't the essential, again we were losing ourselves in words. Besides, he was drunk and kept starting all over from the beginning. But there really wasn't any more to say, nothing at all. Even so, I'd have listened to him for a while yet, quietly half asleep, but the others started contradicting him and that made him mad.

In his rage he clouted the little stove. The whole thing collapsed and turned over: the stovepipe, the grate, the glowing coals. Mandamour was as strong as an ox. To make matters worse he wanted to show us the genuine Fire Dance. He wanted to take off his shoes and prance around on the coals.

There had been some bad blood between Gustave and the bar owner about a slot machine that hadn't been licensed … Vaudescal was a snake in the grass. You couldn't trust him. His shirts were too clean for him to be really honest. He was vindictive and he was a stool pigeon. The riverbanks are full of that kind.

Parapine suspected that he was laying for Mandamour, hoping to take advantage of his drunkenness and get him fired.

Parapine had stopped him from doing his Fire Dance and made him feel ashamed. We pushed Mandamour to the end of the table. There he finally collapsed, as quiet as a mouse, amid Gargantuan sighs and smells. And fell asleep.

Far in the distance the tugboat whistled; its call passed the bridge, one more arch, then another, the lock, another bridge, farther and farther … It was summoning all the barges on the river, every last one, and the whole city and the sky and the countryside, and ourselves, to carry us all away, the Seine too, and that would be the end of us.

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Viaje al fin de la noche

Celine

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Viaje al fin de la noche

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Celine
Viaje al fin de la noche

*A Elisabeth Craig**

*

Viajar es muy útil, hace trabajar la imaginación. El resto no son sino decepciones y fatigas. Nuestro viaje es por entero imaginario. A eso debe su fuerza.

Va de la vida a la muerte. Hombres, animales, ciudades y cosas, todo es imaginado. Es una novela, una simple historia ficticia. Lo dice Littré, que nunca se equivoca.

Y, además, que todo el mundo puede hacer igual. Basta con cerrar los ojos.

Está del otro lado de la vida.

La cosa empezó así. Yo nunca había dicho nada. Nada. Fue Arthur Gánate quien me hizo hablar. Arthur, un compañero, estudiante de medicina como yo. Resulta que nos encontramos en la Place Clichy. Después de comer. Quería hablarme. Lo escuché. «¡No nos quedemos fuera! – me dijo-. ¡Vamos adentro!» Y fui y entré con él. «¡Esta terraza está como para freír huevos! ¡Ven por aquí!», comenzó. Entonces advertimos también que no había nadie en las calles, por el calor; ni un coche, nada. Cuando hace mucho frío, tampoco; no ves a nadie en las calles; pero, si fue él mismo, ahora que recuerdo, quien me dijo, hablando de eso: «La gente de París parece estar siempre ocupada, pero, en realidad, se pasean de la mañana a la noche; la prueba es que, cuando no hace bueno para pasear, demasiado frío o demasiado calor, desaparecen. Están todos dentro, tomando cafés con leche o cañas de cerveza. ¡Ya ves! ¡El siglo de la velocidad!, dicen. Pero, ¿dónde? ¡Todo cambia, que es una barbaridad!, según cuentan. ¿Cómo así? Nada ha cambiado, la verdad. Siguen admirándose y se acabó. Y tampoco eso es nuevo. ¡Algunas palabras, no muchas, han cambiado! Dos o tres aquí y allá, insignificantes…» Conque, muy orgullosos de haber señalado verdades tan oportunas, nos quedamos allí sentados, mirando, arrobados, a las damas del café.

Después salió a relucir en la conversación el presidente Poincaré, que, justo aquella mañana, iba a inaugurar una exposición canina, y, después, burla burlando, salió también *Le Temps,* donde lo habíamos leído. «¡Hombre, *Le Temps* ¡Ése es un señor periódico! – dijo Arthur Gánate para pincharme-. ¡No tiene igual para defender a la raza francesa!»

«¡Y bien que lo necesita la raza francesa, puesto que no existe!», fui y le dije, para devolverle la pelota y demostrar que estaba documentado.

«¡Que sí! ¡Claro que existe! ¡Y bien noble que es! – insistía él-. Y hasta te diría que es la más noble del mundo. ¡Y el que lo niegue es un cabrito!» Y me puso de vuelta y media. Ahora, que yo me mantuve en mis trece.

«¡No es verdad! La raza, lo que tú llamas raza, es ese hatajo de pobres diablos como yo, legañosos, piojosos, ateridos, que vinieron a parar aquí perseguidos por el hambre, la peste, los tumores y el frío, que llegaron vencidos de los cuatro confines del mundo. El mar les impedía seguir adelante. Eso es Francia y los franceses también.»

«Bardamu -me dijo entonces, muy serio y un poco triste-, nuestros padres eran como nosotros. ¡No hables mal de ellos!…»

«¡Tienes razón, Arthur! ¡En eso tienes razón! Rencorosos y dóciles, violados, robados, destripados, y gilipollas siempre. ¡Como nosotros eran! ¡Ni que lo digas! ¡No cambiamos! Ni de calcetines, ni de amos, ni de opiniones, o tan tarde, que no vale la pena. Hemos nacido fieles, ¡ya es que reventamos de fidelidad! Soldados sin paga, héroes para todo el mundo, monosabios, palabras dolientes, somos los favoritos del Rey Miseria. ¡Nos tiene en sus manos! Cuando nos portamos mal, aprieta… Tenemos sus dedos en torno al cuello, siempre, cosa que molesta para hablar; hemos de estar atentos, si queremos comer… Por una cosita de nada, te estrangula… Eso no es vida…»

«¡Nos queda el amor, Bardamu!»

«Arthur, el amor es el infinito puesto al alcance de los caniches, ¡y yo tengo dignidad!», le respondí.

«Puestos a hablar de ti, ¡tú es que eres un anarquista y se acabó!»

Siempre un listillo, como veis, y el no va más en opiniones avanzadas.

«Tú lo has dicho, chico, ¡anarquista! Y la prueba mejor es que he compuesto una especie de oración vengadora y social. ¡A ver qué te parece! Se llama *Las alas de oro…»* Y entonces se la recité:

Un Dios que cuenta los minutos y los céntimos, un Dios desesperado, sensual y gruñón como un marrano. Un marrano con alas de oro y que se tira por todos lados, panza arriba, en busca de caricias. Ése es, nuestro señor. ¡Abracémonos!

«Tu obrita no se sostiene ante la vida. Yo estoy por el orden establecido y no me gusta la política. Y, además, el día en que la patria me pida derramar mi sangre por ella, me encontrará, desde luego, listo para entregársela y al instante.» Así me respondió.

Precisamente la guerra se nos acercaba a los dos, sin que lo hubiéramos advertido, y ya mi cabeza resistía poco. Aquella discusión breve, pero animada, me había fatigado. Y, además, estaba afectado porque el camarero me había llamado tacaño por la propina. En fin, al final Arthur y yo nos reconciliamos, por completo. Éramos de la misma opinión sobre casi todo.

«Es verdad, tienes razón a fin de cuentas -convine, conciliador-, pero, en fin, estamos todos sentados en una gran galera, remamos todos, con todas nuestras fuerzas… ¡no me irás a decir que no!… ¡Sentados sobre clavos incluso y dando el callo! ¿Y qué sacamos? ¡Nada! Estacazos sólo, miserias, patrañas y cabronadas encima. ¡Que trabajamos!, dicen. Eso es aún más chungo que todo lo demás, el dichoso trabajo. Estamos abajo, en las bodegas, echando el bofe, con una peste y los cataplines chorreando sudor, ¡ya ves! Arriba, en el puente, al fresco, están los amos, tan campantes, con bellas mujeres, rosadas y bañadas de perfume, en las rodillas. Nos hacen subir al puente. Entonces se ponen sus chisteras y nos echan un discurso, a berridos, así: "Hatajo de granujas, ¡es la guerra! – nos dicen-. Vamos a abordarlos, a esos cabrones de la patria n.° 2, ¡y les vamos a reventar la sesera! ¡Venga! ¡Venga! ¡A bordo hay todo lo necesario! ¡Todos a coro! Pero antes quiero veros gritar bien: *'¡Viva la patria n.° 1!'* ¡Que se os oiga de lejos! El que grite más fuerte, ¡recibirá la medalla y la peladilla del Niño Jesús! ¡Hostias! Y los que no quieran diñarla en el mar, pueden ir a palmar en tierra, ¡donde se tarda aún menos que aquí!"»

«¡Exacto! ¡Sí, señor!», aprobó Arthur, ahora más dispuesto a dejarse convencer.

Pero, mira por dónde, justo por delante del café donde estábamos sentados, fue a pasar un regimiento, con el coronel montado a la cabeza y todo, ¡muy apuesto, por cierto, y de lo más gallardo, el coronel! Di un brinco de entusiasmo al instante.

«¡Voy a ver si es así!», fui y le grité a Arthur, y ya me iba a alistarme y a la carrera incluso.

«¡No seas gilipollas, Ferdinand!», me gritó, a su vez, Arthur, molesto, seguro, por el efecto que había causado mi heroísmo en la gente que nos miraba.

Me ofendió un poco que se lo tomara así, pero no me hizo desistir. Ya iba yo marcando el paso. «¡Aquí estoy y aquí me quedo!», me dije.

«Ya veremos, ¿eh, pardillo?», me dio incluso tiempo a gritarle antes de doblar la esquina con el regimiento, tras el coronel y su música. Así fue exactamente.

Después marchamos mucho rato. Calles y más calles, que nunca acababan, llenas de civiles y sus mujeres que nos animaban y lanzaban flores, desde las terrazas, delante de las estaciones, desde las iglesias atestadas. ¡Había una de patriotas! Y después empezó a haber menos… Empezó a llover y cada vez había menos y luego nadie nos animaba, ni uno, por el camino.

Entonces, ¿ya sólo quedábamos nosotros? ¿Unos tras otros? Cesó la música. «En resumen -me dije entonces, cuando vi que la cosa se ponía fea-, ¡esto ya no tiene gracia! ¡Hay que volver a empezar!» Iba a marcharme. ¡Demasiado tarde! Habían cerrado la puerta a la chita callando, los civiles, tras nosotros. Estábamos atrapados, como ratas.

Una vez dentro, hasta el cuello. Nos hicieron montar a caballo y después, al cabo de dos meses, ir a pie otra vez. Tal vez porque costaba muy caro. En fin, una mañana, el coronel buscaba su montura, su ordenanza se había marchado con ella, no se sabía adonde, a algún lugar, seguro, por donde las balas pasaran con menor facilidad que en medio de la carretera. Pues en ella habíamos acabado situándonos, el coronel y yo, justo en medio de la carretera, y yo sostenía el registro en que él escribía sus órdenes.

A lo lejos, en la carretera, apenas visibles, había dos puntos negros, en medio, como nosotros, pero eran dos alemanes que llevaban más de un cuarto de hora disparando.

Él, nuestro coronel, tal vez supiera por qué disparaban aquellos dos; quizá los alemanes lo supiesen también, pero yo, la verdad, no. Por más que me refrescaba la memoria, no recordaba haberles hecho nada a los alemanes. Siempre había sido muy amable y educado con ellos. Me los conocía un poco, a los alemanes; hasta había ido al colegio con ellos, de pequeño, cerca de Hannover. Había hablado su lengua. Entonces eran una masa de cretinitos chillones, de ojos pálidos y furtivos, como de lobos; íbamos juntos, después del colegio, a tocar a las chicas en los bosques cercanos, y también tirábamos con ballesta y pistola, que incluso nos comprábamos por cuatro marcos. Bebíamos cerveza azucarada. Pero de eso a que nos dispararan ahora a la barriga, sin venir siquiera a hablarnos primero, y justo en medio de la carretera, había un trecho y un abismo incluso. Demasiada diferencia.

En resumen, no había quien entendiera la guerra. Aquello no podía continuar.

Entonces, ¿les había ocurrido algo extraordinario a aquella gente? Algo que yo no sentía, ni mucho menos. No debía de haberlo advertido…

Mis sentimientos hacia ellos seguían siendo los mismos. Pese a todo, sentía como un deseo de intentar comprender su brutalidad, pero más ganas aún tenía de marcharme, unas ganas enormes, absolutas: de repente todo aquello me parecía consecuencia de un error tremendo.

«En una historia así, no hay nada que hacer, hay que ahuecar el ala», me decía, al fin y al cabo…

Por encima de nuestras cabezas, a dos milímetros, a un milímetro tal vez de las sienes, venían a vibrar, uno tras otro, esos largos hilos de acero tentadores trazados por las balas que te quieren matar, en el caliente aire del verano.

Nunca me había sentido tan inútil como entre todas aquellas balas y los rayos de aquel sol. Una burla inmensa, universal.

En aquella época tenía yo sólo veinte años de edad. Alquerías desiertas a lo lejos, iglesias vacías y abiertas, como si los campesinos hubieran salido todos de las aldeas para ir a una fiesta en el otro extremo de la provincia y nos hubiesen dejado, confiados, todo lo que poseían, su campo, las carretas con los varales al aire, sus tierras, sus cercados, la carretera, los árboles e incluso las vacas, un perro con su cadena, todo, vamos. Para que pudiésemos hacer con toda tranquilidad lo que quisiéramos durante su ausencia. Parecía muy amable por su parte. «De todos modos, si no hubieran estado ausentes -me decía yo-, si aún hubiese habido gente por aquí, ¡seguro que no nos habríamos comportado de modo tan innoble! ¡Tan mal!

¡No nos habríamos atrevido delante de ellos!» Pero, ¡ya no quedaba nadie para vigilarnos! Sólo nosotros, como recién casados que hacen guarrerías, cuando todo el mundo se ha ido.

También pensaba (detrás de un árbol) que me habría gustado verlo allí, al Dérouléde ese, de que tanto me habían hablado, explicarme cómo hacía él, cuando recibía una bala en plena panza.

Aquellos alemanes agachados en la carretera, tiradores tozudos, tenían mala puntería, pero parecían tener balas para dar y tomar, almacenes llenos sin duda. Estaba claro: ¡la guerra no había terminado! Nuestro coronel, las cosas como son, ¡demostraba una bravura asombrosa! Se paseaba por el centro mismo de la carretera y después en todas direcciones entre las trayectorias, tan tranquilo como si estuviese esperando a un amigo en el andén de la estación: sólo, que un poco impaciente.

Pero el campo, debo decirlo en seguida, yo nunca he podido apreciarlo, siempre me ha parecido triste, con sus lodazales interminables, sus casas donde la gente nunca está y sus caminos que no van a ninguna parte. Pero, si se le añade la guerra, además, ya es que no hay quien lo soporte. El viento se había levantado, brutal, a cada lado de los taludes, los álamos mezclaban las ráfagas de sus hojas con los ruidillos secos que venían de allá hacia nosotros. Aquellos soldados desconocidos nunca nos acertaban, pero nos rodeaban de miles de muertos, parecíamos acolchados con ellos. Yo ya no me atrevía a moverme.

Entonces, ¡el coronel era un monstruo! Ahora ya estaba yo seguro, peor que un perro, ¡no se imaginaba su fin! Al mismo tiempo, se me ocurrió que debía de haber muchos como él en nuestro ejército, tan valientes, y otros tantos sin duda en el ejército de enfrente. ¡A saber cuántos! ¿Uno, dos, varios millones, tal vez, en total? Entonces mi canguelo se volvió pánico. Con seres semejantes, aquella imbecilidad infernal podía continuar indefinidamente… ¿Por qué habrían de detenerse? Nunca me había parecido tan implacable la sentencia de los hombres y las cosas.

Pensé -¡presa del espanto!-: ¿seré, pues, el único cobarde de la tierra?… ¿Perdido entre dos millones de locos heroicos, furiosos y armados hasta los dientes? Con cascos, sin cascos, sin caballos, en motos, dando alaridos, en autos, pitando, tirando, conspirando, volando, de rodillas, cavando, escabulléndose, caracoleando por los senderos, lanzando detonaciones, ocultos en la tierra como en una celda de manicomio, para destruirlo todo, Alemania, Francia y los continentes, todo lo que respira, destruir, más rabiosos que los perros, adorando su rabia (cosa que no hacen los perros), cien, mil veces más rabiosos que mil perros, ¡y mucho más perversos! ¡Estábamos frescos! La verdad era, ahora me daba cuenta, que me había metido en una cruzada apocalíptica.

Somos vírgenes del horror, igual que del placer. ¿Cómo iba a figurarme aquel horror al abandonar la Place Clichy? ¿Quién iba a poder prever, antes de entrar de verdad en la guerra, todo lo que contenía la cochina alma heroica y holgazana de los hombres? Ahora me veía cogido en aquella huida en masa, hacia el asesinato en común, hacia el fuego… Venía de las profundidades y había llegado.

El coronel seguía sin inmutarse, yo lo veía recibir, en el talud, cortas misivas del general, que después rompía en pedacitos, tras haberlas leído sin prisa, entre las balas. Entonces, ¿en ninguna de ellas iba la orden de detener al instante aquella abominación? Entonces, ¿no le decían los de arriba que había un error? ¿Un error abominable? ¿Una confusión? ¿Que se habían equivocado? ¡Que habían querido hacer maniobras en broma y no asesinatos! Pues, ¡claro que no! «¡Continúe, coronel, va por buen camino!» Eso le escribía sin duda el general Des Entrayes, de la división, el jefe de todos nosotros, del que recibía una misiva cada cinco minutos, por mediación de un enlace, a quien el miedo volvía cada vez un poco más verde y cagueta. ¡Aquel muchacho habría podido ser mi hermano en el miedo! Pero tampoco teníamos tiempo para confraternizar.

Conque, ¿no había error? Eso de dispararnos, así, sin vernos siquiera, ¡no estaba prohibido! Era una de las cosas que se podían hacer sin merecer un broncazo. Estaba reconocido incluso, alentado seguramente por la gente seria, ¡como la lotería, los esponsales, la caza de montería!… Sin objeción. Yo acababa de descubrir de un golpe y por entero la guerra. Había quedado desvirgado. Hay que estar casi solo ante ella, como yo en aquel momento, para verla bien, a esa puta, de frente y de perfil. Acababan de encender la guerra entre nosotros y los de enfrente, ¡y ahora ardía! Como la corriente entre los dos carbones de un arco voltaico. ¡Y no estaba a punto de apagarse, el carbón! íbamos a ir todos para adelante, el coronel igual que los demás, con todas sus faroladas, y su piltrafa no iba a hacer un asado mejor que la mía, cuando la corriente de enfrente le pasara entre ambos hombros.

Hay muchas formas de estar condenado a muerte. ¡Ah, qué no habría dado, cretino de mí, en aquel momento por estar en la cárcel en lugar de allí! Por haber robado, previsor, algo, por ejemplo, cuando era tan fácil, en algún sitio, cuando aún estaba a tiempo. ¡No piensa uno en nada! De la cárcel sales vivo; de la guerra, no. Todo lo demás son palabras.

Si al menos hubiera tenido tiempo aún, pero, ¡ya no! ¡Ya no había nada que robar! ¡Qué bien se estaría en una cárcel curiosita, me decía, donde no pasan las balas! ¡Nunca pasan! Conocía una a punto, al sol, ¡calentita! En un sueño, la de Saint-Germain precisamente, tan cerca del bosque, la conocía bien, en tiempos pasaba a menudo por allí. ¡Cómo cambia uno! Era un niño entonces y aquella cárcel me daba miedo. Es que aún no conocía a los hombres. No volveré a creer nunca lo que dicen, lo que piensan. De los hombres, y de ellos sólo, es de quien hay que tener miedo, siempre.

¿Cuánto tiempo tendría que durar su delirio, para que se detuvieran agotados, por fin, aquellos monstruos? ¿Cuánto tiempo puede durar un acceso así? ¿Meses? ¿Años? ¿Cuánto? ¿Tal vez hasta la muerte de todo el mundo, de todos los locos? ¿Hasta el último? Y como los acontecimientos presentaban aquel cariz desesperado, me decidí a jugarme el todo por el todo, a intentar la última gestión, la suprema: ¡tratar, yo solo, de detener la guerra! Al menos en el punto en que me encontraba.

El coronel deambulaba a dos pasos. Yo iba a ir a hablarle. Nunca lo había hecho. Era el momento de atreverse. Al punto a que habíamos llegado, ya casi no había nada que perder. «¿Qué quiere?», me preguntaría, me imaginaba, muy sorprendido, seguro, por mi audaz interrupción. Entonces le explicaría las cosas, tal como las veía. A ver qué pensaba él. En la vida lo principal es explicarse. Cuatro ojos ven mejor que dos.

Iba a hacer esa gestión decisiva, cuando, en ese preciso instante, llegó hacia nosotros, a paso ligero, extenuado, derrengado, un «caballero de a pie» (como se decía entonces) con el casco boca arriba en la mano, como Belisario, y, además, tembloroso y cubierto de barro, con el rostro aún más verdusco que el del otro enlace. Tartamudeaba y parecía sufrir un dolor espantoso, aquel caballero, como si saliera de una tumba y sintiese náuseas. Entonces, ¿tampoco le gustaban las balas a aquel fantasma? ¿Las presentía como yo?

«¿Qué hay?», le cortó, brutal y molesto, el coronel, al tiempo que lanzaba una mirada como de acero a aquel aparecido.

Enfurecía a nuestro coronel verlo así, a aquel innoble caballero, con porte tan poco reglamentario y cagadito de la emoción. No le gustaba nada el miedo. Era evidente. Y, para colmo, el casco en la mano, como un bombín, desentonaba de lo lindo en nuestro regimiento de ataque, un regimiento que se lanzaba a la guerra. Parecía saludarla, aquel caballero de a pie, a la guerra, al entrar.

Ante su mirada de oprobio, el mensajero, vacilante, volvió a ponerse «firmes», con los meñiques en la costura del pantalón, como se debe hacer en esos casos. Oscilaba así, tieso, en el talud, con sudor cayéndole a lo largo de la yugular, y las mandíbulas le temblaban tanto, que se le escapaban gritos abortados, como un perrito soñando. Era difícil saber si quería hablarnos o si lloraba.

Nuestros alemanes agachados al final de la carretera acababan de cambiar de instrumento en aquel preciso instante. Ahora proseguían con sus disparates a base de ametralladora; crepitaban como grandes paquetes de cerillas y a nuestro alrededor llegaban volando enjambres de balas rabiosas, insistentes como avispas.

Aun así, el hombre consiguió pronunciar una frase articulada:

«Acaban de matar al sargento Barousse, mi coronel», dijo de un tirón.

«¿Y qué más?»

«Lo han matado, cuando iba a buscar el furgón del pan, en la carretera de Etrapes, mi coronel.»

«¿Y qué más?»

«¡Lo ha reventado un obús!»

«¿Y qué más, hostias?»

«Nada más, mi coronel…»

«¿Eso es todo?»

«Sí, eso es todo, mi coronel.»

«¿Y el pan?», preguntó el coronel.

Ahí acabó el diálogo, porque recuerdo muy bien que tuvo el tiempo justo de decir: «¿Y el pan?». Y después se acabó. Después, sólo fuego y estruendo. Pero es que un estruendo, que nunca hubiera uno pensado que pudiese existir. Nos llenó hasta tal punto los ojos, los oídos, la nariz, la boca, al instante, el estruendo, que me pareció que era el fin, que yo mismo me había convertido en fuego y estruendo.

Pero, no; cesó el fuego y siguió largo rato en mi cabeza y luego los brazos y las piernas temblando como si alguien los sacudiera por detrás. Parecía que los miembros me iban a abandonar, pero siguieron conmigo. En el humo que continuó picando en los ojos largo rato, el penetrante olor a pólvora y azufre permanecía, como para matar las chinches y las pulgas de la tierra entera.

Justo después, pensé en el sargento Barousse, que acababa de reventar, como nos había dicho el otro. Era una buena noticia. «¡Mejor! – pensé al instante-. ¡Un granuja de cuidado menos en el regimiento!» Me había querido someter a consejo de guerra por una lata de conservas. «¡A cada cual su guerra!», me dije. En ese sentido, hay que reconocerlo, de vez en cuando, ¡parecía servir para algo, la guerra! Conocía tres o cuatro más en el regimiento, cerdos asquerosos, a los que yo habría ayudado con gusto a encontrar un obús como Barousse.

En cuanto al coronel, no le deseaba yo ningún mal. Sin embargo, también él estaba muerto. Al principio, no lo vi. Es que la explosión lo había lanzado sobre el talud, de costado, y lo había proyectado hasta los brazos del caballero de a pie, el mensajero, también él cadáver. Se abrazaban los dos de momento y para siempre, pero el caballero había quedado sin cabeza, sólo tenía un boquete por encima del cuello, con sangre dentro hirviendo con burbujas, como mermelada en la olla. El coronel tenía el vientre abierto y una fea mueca en el rostro. Debía de haberle hecho daño, aquel golpe, en el momento en que se había producido. ¡Peor para él! Si se hubiera marchado al empezar el tiroteo, no le habría pasado nada.

Toda aquella carne junta sangraba de lo lindo.

Aún estallaban obuses a derecha e izquierda de la escena.

Abandoné el lugar sin más demora, encantado de tener un pretexto tan bueno para pirarme. Iba canturreando incluso, titubeante, como cuando, al acabar una regata, sientes flojedad en las piernas. «¡Un solo obús! La verdad es que se despacha rápido un asunto con un solo obús -me decía-. ¡Madre mía! – no dejaba de repetirme-. ¡Madre mía!…»

En el otro extremo de la carretera no quedaba nadie. Los alemanes se habían marchado. Sin embargo, en aquella ocasión yo había aprendido muy rápido a caminar, en adelante, protegido por el perfil de los árboles. Estaba impaciente por llegar al campamento para saber si habían muerto otros del regimiento en exploración. ¡También debe de haber trucos, me decía, además, para dejarse coger prisionero!… Aquí y allá nubes de humo acre se aferraban a los montículos. «¿No estarán todos muertos ahora? – me preguntaba-. Ya que no quieren entender nada de nada, lo más ventajoso y práctico sería eso, que los mataran a todos rápido… Así acabaríamos en seguida… Regresaríamos a casa… Volveríamos a pasar tal vez por la Place Clichy triunfales… Uno o dos sólo, supervivientes… Según mi deseo… Muchachos apuestos y bien plantados, tras el general, todos los demás habrían muerto como el coronel… como Barousse… como Vanaille (otro cabrón)… etc. Nos cubrirían de condecoraciones, de flores, pasaríamos bajo el Arco de Triunfo. Entraríamos al restaurante, nos servirían sin pagar, ya no pagaríamos nada, ¡nunca más en la vida! ¡Somos los héroes!, diríamos en el momento de la cuenta… ¡Defensores de la Patria! ¡Y bastaría!… ¡Pagaríamos con banderitas francesas!… La cajera rechazaría, incluso, el dinero de los héroes y hasta nos daría del suyo, junto con besos, cuando pasáramos ante su caja. Valdría la pena vivir.»

Al huir, advertí que me sangraba un brazo, pero un poco sólo, no era una herida de verdad, ni mucho menos, un desollón. Vuelta a empezar.

Se puso a llover de nuevo, los campos de Flandes chorreaban de agua sucia. Seguí largo rato sin encontrar a nadie, sólo el viento y poco después el sol. De vez en cuando, no sabía de dónde, una bala, así, por entre el sol y el aire, me buscaba, juguetona, empeñada en matarme, en aquella soledad, a mí. ¿Por qué? Nunca más, aun cuando viviera cien años, me pasearía por el campo. Lo juré.

Mientras seguía adelante, recordaba la ceremonia de la víspera. En un prado se había celebrado, esa ceremonia, detrás de una colina; el coronel, con su potente voz, había arengado el regimiento: «¡Ánimo! – había dicho-. ¡Ánimo! ¡Y viva Francia!» Cuando se carece de imaginación, morir es cosa de nada; cuando se tiene, morir es cosa seria. Era mi opinión. Nunca había comprendido tantas cosas a la vez.

El coronel, por su parte, nunca había tenido imaginación. Toda su desgracia se había debido a eso y, sobre todo, la nuestra. ¿Es que era yo, entonces, el único que tenía imaginación para la muerte en aquel regimiento? Para muerte, prefería la mía, lejana… al cabo de veinte… treinta años… tal vez más, a la que me ofrecían al instante: trapiñando el barro de Flandes, a dos carrillos, y no sólo por la boca, abierta de oreja a oreja por la metralla. Tiene uno derecho a opinar sobre su propia muerte, ¿no? Pero, entonces, ¿adonde ir? ¿Hacia delante? De espaldas al enemigo. Si los gendarmes me hubieran pescado así, de paseo, me habrían dado para el pelo bien. Me habrían juzgado esa misma tarde, rápido, sin ceremonias, en un aula de colegio abandonado. Había muchas aulas vacías, por todos los sitios por donde pasábamos. Habrían jugado conmigo a la justicia, como juegan los niños cuando el maestro se ha ido. Los suboficiales en el estrado, sentados, y yo de pie, con las manos esposadas, ante los pupitres. Por la mañana, me habrían fusilado: doce balas, más una. Entonces, ¿qué?

Y volvía yo a pensar en el coronel, lo bravo que era aquel hombre, con su coraza, sus cascos y sus bigotes; si lo hubieran enseñado paseándose, como lo había visto yo, bajo las balas y los obuses, en un espectáculo de variedades, habría llenado una sala como el Alhambra de entonces, habría eclipsado a Fragson, aun siendo éste un astro extraordinario en la época de que os hablo. Era lo que yo pensaba. ¿Ánimo? «¡Y una leche!», pensaba.

Después de horas y horas de marcha furtiva y prudente, divisé por fin a nuestros soldados delante de un caserío. Era una de nuestras avanzadillas. La de un escuadrón alojado por allí. Ni una sola baja entre ellos, me anunciaron. ¡Todos vivos! Y yo, portador de la gran noticia: «¡El coronel ha muerto!», fui y les grité, en cuanto estuve bastante cerca del puesto. «¡Hay coroneles de sobra!», me devolvió la pelota el cabo Pistil, que precisamente estaba de guardia y hasta de servicio.

«Y en espera de que substituyan al coronel, no te escaquees tú, vete con Empouille y Kerdoncuff a la distribución de carne; coged dos sacos cada uno, es ahí detrás de la iglesia… Esa que se ve allá… Y no dejéis que os den sólo huesos como ayer. ¡Y a ver si espabiláis para estar de vuelta en el escuadrón antes de la noche, cabritos!»

Conque nos pusimos en camino los tres.

«¡Nunca volveré a contarles nada!», me decía yo, enfadado. Comprendía que no valía la pena contar nada a aquella gente, que un drama como el que yo había visto los traía sin cuidado, a semejantes cerdos, que ya era demasiado tarde para que pudiese interesar aún. Y pensar que ocho días antes la muerte de un coronel, como la que había sucedido, se habría publicado a cuatro columnas y con mi fotografía. ¡Qué brutos!

Así, que en un prado, quemado por el sol de agosto, y a la sombra de los cerezos, era donde distribuían toda la carne para el regimiento. Sobre sacos y lonas de tienda desplegadas, e incluso sobre la hierba, había kilos y kilos de tripas extendidas, de grasa en copos amarillos y pálidos, corderos destripados con los órganos en desorden, chorreando en arroyuelos ingeniosos por el césped circundante, un buey entero cortado en dos, colgado de un árbol, al que aún estaban arrancando despojos, con muchos esfuerzos y entre blasfemias, los cuatro carniceros del regimiento. Los escuadrones, insultándose con ganas, se disputaban las grasas y, sobre todo, los riñones, en medio de las moscas, en enjambres como sólo se ven en momentos así y musicales como pajarillos.

Y más sangre por todas partes, en charcos viscosos y confluyentes que buscaban la pendiente por la hierba. Unos pasos más allá estaban matando el último cerdo. Ya cuatro hombres y un carnicero se disputaban ciertas tripas aún no arrancadas.

«¡Eh, tú, cabrito! ¡Que fuiste tú quien nos chorizaste el lomo ayer!…»

Aún tuve tiempo de echar dos o tres vistazos a aquella desavenencia alimentaria, al tiempo que me apoyaba en un árbol, y hube de ceder a unas ganas inmensas de vomitar, pero lo que se dice vomitar, hasta desmayarme.

Me llevaron hasta el acantonamiento en una camilla, pero no sin aprovechar la ocasión para birlarme mis dos bolsas de tela marrón.

Me despertó otra bronca del sargento. La guerra no se podía tragar.

Todo llega y, hacia fines de aquel mismo mes de agosto, me tocó el turno de ascender a cabo. Con frecuencia me enviaban, con cinco hombres, en misión de enlace, a las órdenes del general Des Entrayes. Ese jefe era bajo de estatura, silencioso, y no parecía a primera vista ni cruel ni heroico. Pero había que desconfiar… Parecía preferir, por encima de todo, su comodidad. No cesaba de pensar incluso, en su comodidad, y, aunque nos batíamos en retirada desde hacía más de un mes, abroncaba a todo el mundo, si su ordenanza no le encontraba, al llegar a una etapa, en cada nuevo acantonamiento, cama bien limpia y cocina acondicionada a la moderna.

Al jefe de Estado Mayor, con sus cuatro galones, esa preocupación por la comodidad lo traía frito. Las exigencias domésticas del general Des Entrayes le irritaban. Sobre todo porque él, cretino, gastrítico en sumo grado y estreñido, no sentía la menor afición por la comida. De todos

modos, tenía que comer sus huevos al plato en la mesa del general y recibir en esa ocasión sus quejas. Se es militar o no se es. No obstante, yo no podía compadecerlo, porque como oficial era un cabronazo de mucho cuidado. Para que veáis cómo era: cuando habíamos estado por ahí danzando hasta la noche, de caminos a colinas y entre alfalfa y zanahorias, bien que acabábamos deteniéndonos para que nuestro general pudiera acostarse en alguna parte. Le buscábamos una aldea tranquila, bien al abrigo, donde aún no acampaban tropas y, si ya había tropas en la aldea, levantaban el campo a toda prisa, las echábamos, sencillamente, a dormir al sereno, aun cuando ya hubieran montado los pabellones.

La aldea estaba reservada en exclusiva para el Estado Mayor, sus caballos, sus cantinas, sus bagajes, y también para el cabrón del comandante. Se llamaba Pinçon, aquel canalla, el comandante Pinçon. Espero que ya haya estirado la pata (y no de muerte suave). Pero en aquel momento de que hablo, estaba más vivo que la hostia, el Pinçon. Todas las noches nos reunía a los hombres del enlace y nos ponía de vuelta y media para hacernos entrar en vereda e intentar avivar nuestro ardor. Nos mandaba a todos los diablos, ¡a nosotros, que habíamos estado en danza todo el día detrás del general! ¡Pie a tierra! ¡A caballo! ¡Pie a tierra otra vez! A llevar sus órdenes así, de acá para allá. Igual podrían habernos ahogado, cuando acabábamos. Habría sido más práctico para todos.

«¡Marchaos todos! ¡Incorporaos a vuestros regimientos! ¡Y a escape!», gritaba.

«¿Dónde está el regimiento, mi comandante?», preguntábamos…

«En Barbagny.»

«¿Dónde está Barbagny?»

«¡Es por allí!»

Por allí, donde señalaba, sólo había noche, como en todos lados, una noche enorme que se tragaba la carretera a dos pasos de nosotros, hasta el punto de que sólo destacaba de la negrura un trocito de carretera del tamaño de la lengua.

¡Vete a buscar su Barbagny al fin del mundo! ¡Habría habido que sacrificar todo un escuadrón, al menos, para encontrar su Barbagny! Y, además, ¡un escuadrón de bravos! Y yo, que ni era bravo ni veía razón alguna para serlo, tenía, evidentemente, aún menos deseos que nadie de encontrar su Barbagny, del que, además, él mismo nos hablaba al azar. Era como si, a fuerza de broncas, hubiesen intentado infundirme deseos de ir a suicidarme. Esas cosas se tienen o no se tienen.

De toda aquella obscuridad, tan densa, nada más caer la noche, que parecía que no volverías a ver el brazo en cuanto lo extendías más allá del hombro, yo sólo sabía una cosa, pero ésa con toda certeza, y era que encerraba voluntades homicidas enormes e innumerables.

En cuanto caía la noche, aquel bocazas de Estado Mayor sólo pensaba en enviarnos al otro mundo y muchas veces le daba ya a la puesta de sol. Luchábamos un poco con él a base de inercia, nos obstinábamos en no entenderlo, nos aferrábamos al acantonamiento, donde estábamos a gustito, lo más posible, pero, al final, cuando ya no se veían los árboles, teníamos que ceder y salir a morir un poco; la cena del general estaba lista.

A partir de ese momento todo dependía del azar. Unas veces lo encontrábamos y otras no, el regimiento y su Barbagny. Sobre todo lo encontrábamos por error, porque los centinelas del escuadrón de guardia nos disparaban al llegar. Así, nos dábamos a conocer por fuerza y casi siempre acabábamos la noche haciendo servicios de todas clases, acarreando infinidad de fardos de avena y la tira de cubos de agua, recibiendo broncas hasta quedar aturdidos, además de por el sueño.

Por la mañana volvíamos a salir, los cinco del grupo de enlace, para el cuartel del general Des Entrayes, a continuar la guerra.

Pero la mayoría de las veces no lo encontrábamos, el regimiento, y nos limitábamos a esperar el día dando vueltas en torno a las aldeas por caminos desconocidos, en las lindes de los caseríos evacuados y los bosquecillos traicioneros; los evitábamos lo más posible por miedo a las patrullas alemanas. Sin embargo, en algún sitio había que estar, en espera de la mañana, algún sitio en la noche. No podíamos esquivarlo todo. Desde entonces sé lo que deben de sentir los conejos en un coto de caza.

Los caminos de la piedad son curiosos. Si le hubiésemos dicho al comandante Pinçon que era un cerdo asesino y cobarde, le habríamos dado un placer enorme, el de mandarnos fusilar, en el acto, por el capitán de la gendarmería, que no se separaba de él ni a sol ni a sombra y que, por su parte, no pensaba en otra cosa. No era a los alemanes a quienes tenía fila, el capitán de la gendarmería.

Conque tuvimos que exponernos a las emboscadas durante noches y más noches imbéciles que se seguían, con la esperanza, cada vez más débil, de poder regresar, y sólo ésa, y de que, si regresábamos, no olvidaríamos nunca, absolutamente nunca, que habíamos descubierto en la tierra a un hombre como tú y como yo, pero mucho más sanguinario que los cocodrilos y los tiburones que pasan entre dos aguas, y con las fauces abiertas, en torno a los barcos que van a verterles basura y carne podrida a alta mar, por La Habana.

La gran derrota, en todo, es olvidar, y sobre todo lo que te ha matado, y diñarla sin comprender nunca hasta qué punto son hijoputas los hombres. Cuando estemos al borde del hoyo, no habrá que hacerse el listo, pero tampoco olvidar, habrá que contar todo sin cambiar una palabra, todas las cabronadas más increíbles que hayamos visto en los hombres y después hincar el pico y bajar. Es trabajo de sobra para toda una vida.

Con gusto lo habría yo dado de comida para los tiburones, a aquel comandante Pinçon, y a su gendarme de compañía, para que aprendiesen a vivir, y también mi caballo, al tiempo, para que no sufriera más, porque ya es que no le quedaba lomo, al pobre desgraciado, de tanto dolor que sentía; sólo dos placas de carne le quedaban en el sitio, bajo la silla, de la anchura de mis manos, y supurantes, en carne viva, con grandes regueros de pus que le caían por los bordes de la manta hasta los jarretes. Y, sin embargo, había que trotar encima de él, uno, dos… Se retorcía al trotar. Pero los caballos son mucho más pacientes aún que los hombres. Ondulaba al trotar. Había que dejarlo por fuerza al aire libre. En los graneros, con el olor tan fuerte que despedía, nos asfixiaba. Al montarle al lomo, le dolía tanto, que se curvaba, como por cortesía, y entonces el vientre le llegaba hasta las rodillas. Así, me parecía montar a un asno. Era más cómodo así, hay que reconocerlo. Yo mismo estaba cansado lo mío, con toda la carga que soportaba de acero sobre la cabeza y los hombros.

El general Des Entrayes, en la casa reservada, esperaba su cena. Su mesa estaba puesta, con la lámpara en su sitio.

«Largaos todos de aquí, ¡hostias! – nos conminaba una vez más el Pinçon, enfocándonos la linterna a la altura de la nariz-. ¡Que vamos a sentarnos a la mesa! ¡No os lo repito más! ¿Es que no se van a ir, esos granujas?», gritaba incluso. De la rabia, de mandarnos así a que nos zurcieran, aquel tipo blanco como la cal, recuperaba algo de color en las mejillas.

A veces, el cocinero del general nos daba, antes de marcharnos, una tajadita; tenía la tira de papeo, el general, ya que, según el reglamento, ¡recibía cuarenta raciones para él solo! Ya no era joven, aquel hombre. Debía de estar a punto de jubilarse incluso. Se le doblaban un poco las rodillas al andar. Debía de teñirse los bigotes.

Sus arterias, en las sienes, lo veíamos perfectamente a la luz de la lámpara, cuando nos íbamos, dibujaban meandros como el Sena a la salida de París. Sus hijas eran ya mayores, según decían, solteras y, como él, tampoco eran ricas. Tal vez a causa de esos recuerdos tuviese aspecto tan quisquilloso y gruñón, como un perro viejo molestado en sus hábitos y que intenta encontrar su cesta con cojín dondequiera que le abran la puerta.

Le gustaban los bellos jardines y los rosales, no se perdía una rosaleda, por donde pasábamos. No hay como los generales para amar las rosas. Ya se sabe.

Quieras que no, nos poníamos en camino. ¡Menudo trabajo era poner los pencos al trote! Tenían miedo a moverse por las llagas y, además, de nosotros y de la noche también tenían miedo, ¡de todo, vamos! ¡Nosotros también! Diez veces dábamos la vuelta para preguntar el camino al comandante. Diez veces nos trataba de holgazanes y asquerosos escaqueados. A fuerza de espuelas, pasábamos, por fin, el último puesto de guardia, dábamos la contraseña a los plantones y después nos lanzábamos de golpe a la antipática aventura, a las tinieblas de aquel país de nadie.

A fuerza de deambular de un límite de la sombra a otro, acabábamos orientándonos un poquito, eso creíamos al menos… En cuanto una nube parecía más clara que otra, nos decíamos que habíamos visto algo… Pero lo único seguro ante nosotros era el eco que iba y venía, del trote de los caballos, un ruido que te ahoga, enorme, que no quieres ni imaginar. Parecía que trotaban hasta el cielo, que convocaban a cuantos caballos existiesen en el mundo, para mandarnos matar. Por lo demás, cualquiera habría podido hacerlo con una sola mano, con una carabina, bastaba con que la apoyara, mientras nos esperaba, en el tronco de un árbol. Yo siempre me decía que la primera luz que veríamos sería la del escopetazo final.

Al cabo de cuatro semanas, desde que había empezado la guerra, habíamos llegado a estar tan cansados, tan desdichados, que, a fuerza de cansancio, yo había perdido un poco de mi miedo por el camino. La tortura de verte maltratado día y noche por aquella gente, los suboficiales, los de menor grado sobre todo, más brutos, mezquinos y odiosos aún que de costumbre, acaba quitando las ganas, hasta a los más obstinados, de seguir viviendo.

¡Ah! ¡Qué ganas de marcharse! ¡Para dormir! ¡Lo primero! Y, si de verdad ya no hay forma de marcharse para dormir, entonces las ganas de vivir se van solas. Mientras siguiéramos con vida, deberíamos aparentar que buscábamos el regimiento.

Para que el cerebro de un idiota se ponga en movimiento, tienen que ocurrirle muchas cosas y muy crueles. Quien me había hecho pensar por primera vez en mi vida, pensar de verdad, ideas prácticas y mías personales, había sido, por supuesto, el comandante Pinçon, jeta de tortura. Conque pensaba en él, a más no poder, mientras me bamboleaba, con todo el equipo, bajo el peso del armamento, comparsa que era,

insignificante, en aquel increíble tinglado internacional, en el que me había metido por entusiasmo… Lo confieso.

Cada metro de sombra ante nosotros era una promesa nueva de acabar de una vez y palmarla, pero, de qué modo? Lo único imprevisto en aquella historia era el uniforme del ejecutante. ¿Sería uno de aquí? ¿O uno de enfrente?

¡Yo no le había hecho nada, a aquel Pinçon! ¡Como tampoco a los alemanes!… Con su cara de melocotón podrido, sus cuatro galones que le brillaban de la cabeza al ombligo, sus bigotes tiesos y sus rodillas puntiagudas, sus prismáticos que le colgaban del cuello como un cencerro y su mapa a escala 1:100, ¡venga, hombre! Yo me preguntaba de dónde le vendría la manía, a aquel tipo, de enviar a los otros a diñarla. A los otros, que no tenían mapa.

Nosotros, cuatro a caballo por la carretera, hacíamos tanto ruido como medio regimiento. Debían de oírnos llegar a cuatro horas de allí o, si no, es que no querían oírnos. Entraba dentro de lo posible… ¿Tendrían miedo de nosotros los alemanes? ¡A saber!

Un mes de sueño en cada párpado, ésa era la carga que llevábamos, y otro tanto en la nuca, además de unos cuantos kilos de chatarra.

Se expresaban mal mis compañeros jinetes. Apenas hablaban, con eso está dicho todo. Eran muchachos procedentes de pueblos perdidos de Bretaña y nada de lo que sabían lo habían aprendido en el colegio, sino en el regimiento. Aquella noche, yo había intentado hablar un poco sobre el pueblo de Barbagny con el que iba a mi lado y que se llamaba Kersuzon.

«Oye, Kersuzon -le dije-, mira, esto es las Ardenas… ¿Ves algo a lo lejos? Yo no veo lo que se dice nada…»

«Está negro como un culo», me respondió Kersuzon. Con eso bastaba…

«Oye, ¿no has oído hablar de Barbagny durante el día? ¿Por dónde era?», volví a preguntarle.

«No.»

Y se acabó.

Nunca encontramos el Barbagny. Dimos vueltas en redondo hasta el amanecer, hasta otra aldea, donde nos esperaba el hombre de los prismáticos. Su general tomaba el cafelito en el cenador, delante de la casa del alcalde, cuando llegamos.

«¡Ah, qué hermosa es la juventud, Pinçon!», comentó en voz muy alta a su jefe de Estado Mayor, al vernos pasar, el viejo. Dicho esto, se levantó y se fue hacer pipí y después a dar una vuelta, con las manos a la espalda, encorvada. Estaba muy cansado aquella mañana, me susurró el ordenanza; había dormido mal, el general, trastornos de la vejiga, según contaban.

Kersuzon me respondía siempre igual, cuando le preguntaba por la noche, acabó haciéndome gracia como un tic. Me repitió lo mismo dos o tres veces, a propósito de la obscuridad y el culo, y después murió, lo mataron, algún tiempo después, al salir de una aldea, lo recuerdo muy bien, una aldea que habíamos confundido con otra, franceses que nos habían confundido con los otros.

Justo unos días después de la muerte de Kersuzon fue cuando pensamos y descubrimos un medio, lo que nos puso muy contentos, para no volver a perdernos en la noche.

Conque nos echaban del acantonamiento. Muy bien. Entonces ya no decíamos nada. No refunfuñábamos. «¡Largaos!», decía, como de costumbre, el cadavérico.

«¡Sí, mi comandante!»

Y salíamos al instante hacia donde estaba el cañón, y sin hacernos de rogar, los cinco. Parecía que fuéramos a buscar cerezas. Por allí el terreno era muy ondulado. Era el valle del Mosa, con sus colinas, cubiertas de viñas con uvas aún no maduras, y el otoño y aldeas de madera bien seca después de tres meses de verano, o sea, que ardían con facilidad.

Lo habíamos notado, una noche en que ya no sabíamos adonde ir. Siempre ardía una aldea por donde estaba el cañón. No nos acercábamos demasiado, nos limitábamos a mirarla desde bastante lejos, la aldea, como espectadores, podríamos decir, a diez, doce kilómetros, por ejemplo. Y después todas las noches, por aquella época, muchas aldeas empezaron a arder hacia el horizonte, era algo que se repetía, nos encontrábamos rodeados, como por un círculo muy grande en una fiesta curiosa, de todos aquellos parajes que ardían, delante de nosotros y a ambos lados, con llamas que subían y lamían las nubes.

Todo se consumía en llamas, las iglesias, los graneros, unos tras otros, los almiares, que daban las llamas más vivas, más altas que lo demás, y después las vigas, que se alzaban rectas en la noche, con barbas de pavesas, antes de caer en la hoguera.

Se distingue bien cómo arde una aldea, incluso a veinte kilómetros. Era alegre. Una aldehuela de nada, que ni siquiera se veía de día, al fondo de un campito sin gracia, bueno, pues, ¡no os podéis imaginar, cuando arde, el efecto que puede llegar a hacer! ¡Recuerda a Notre-Dame! Se tira toda una noche ardiendo, una aldea, aun pequeña, al final parece una flor enorme, después sólo un capullo y luego nada.

Empieza a humear y ya es la mañana.

Los caballos, que dejábamos ensillados, por el campo, cerca, no se movían. Nosotros nos íbamos a sobar en la hierba, salvo uno, que se quedaba de guardia, por turno, claro está. Pero, cuando hay fuegos que contemplar, la noche pasa mucho mejor, no es algo que soportar, ya no es soledad.

Lástima que no duraran demasiado las aldeas… Al cabo de un mes, en aquella región, ya no quedaba ni una. Los bosques también recibieron lo suyo, del cañón. No duraron más de ocho días. También hacen fuegos hermosos, los bosques, pero apenas duran.

Después de aquello, las columnas de artillería tomaron todas las carreteras en un sentido y los civiles que escapaban en el otro.

En resumen, ya no podíamos ni ir ni volver; teníamos que quedarnos donde estábamos.

Hacíamos cola para ir a diñarla. Ni siquiera el general encontraba ya campamentos sin soldados. Acabamos durmiendo todos en pleno campo, el general y quien no era general. Los que aún conservaban algo de valor lo perdieron. A partir de aquellos meses empezaron a fusilar a soldados para levantarles la moral, por escuadras, y a citar al gendarme en el orden del día por la forma como hacía su guerrita, la profunda, la auténtica de verdad.

Tras un descanso, volvimos a montar a caballo, unas semanas después, y salimos de nuevo para el Norte. También el frío vino con nosotros. El cañón ya no nos abandonaba. Sin embargo, apenas si nos encontrábamos con los alemanes por casualidad, tan pronto un húsar o un grupo de tiradores, por aquí, por allá, de amarillo y verde, colores bonitos. Parecía que los buscásemos, pero, al divisarlos, nos alejábamos. En cada encuentro, caían dos o tres jinetes, unas veces de los suyos y otras de los nuestros. Y sus caballos sueltos, con sus relucientes estribos saltando, venían galopando hacia nosotros de muy lejos, con sus sillas de borrenes curiosos y sus cueros frescos como las carteras del día de Año Nuevo. A reunirse con nuestros caballos venían, amigos al instante. ¡Qué suerte! ¡Nosotros no habríamos podido hacer lo mismo!

Una mañana, al volver del reconocimiento, el teniente Sainte-Engence estaba invitando a los otros oficiales a comprobar que no les mentía. «¡He ensartado a dos!», aseguraba al corro, al tiempo que mostraba su sable, cuya ranura, hecha a propósito para eso, estaba llena, cierto, de sangre coagulada.

«¡Ha sido bárbaro! ¡Bravo, Sainte-Engence!… ¡Si hubieran visto, señores! ¡Qué asalto!», lo apoyaba el capitán Ortolan.

Acababa de ocurrir en el escuadrón de Ortolan.

«¡Yo no me he perdido nada! ¡No andaba lejos! ¡Un sablazo en el cuello hacia delante y a la derecha!… ¡Zas! ¡Cae el primero!… ¡Otro sablazo en pleno pecho!… ¡A la izquierda! ¡Ensarten! ¡Una auténtica exhibición de concurso, señores!… ¡Bravo otra vez, Sainte-Engence! ¡Dos lanceros! ¡A un kilómetro de aquí! ¡Allí están aún los dos mozos! ¡En pleno sembrado! La guerra se acabó para ellos, ¿eh, Sainte-Engence?… ¡Qué estocada doble! ¡Han debido de vaciarse como conejos!»

El teniente Sainte-Engence, cuyo caballo había galopado largo rato, acogía los homenajes y elogios de sus compañeros con modestia. Ahora que Ortolan había presentado testimonio en su favor, estaba tranquilo y se largaba, llevaba a comer a su yegua, haciéndola girar despacio y en círculo en torno al escuadrón, reunido como tras una carrera de vallas.

«¡Deberíamos enviar allí en seguida otro reconocimiento y por el mismo sitio! ¡En seguida! – decía el capitán Ortolan, presa de la mayor agitación-. Esos dos tipos han debido de venir a perderse por aquí, pero ha de haber otros detrás… ¡Hombre, usted, cabo Bardamu! ¡Vaya con sus cuatro hombres!»

A mí se dirigía el capitán.

«Y cuando les disparen, pues… ¡intenten localizarlos y vengan a decirme en seguida dónde están! ¡Deben de ser brandeburgueses!…»

Los de la activa contaban que en el acuartelamiento, en tiempo de paz, no aparecía casi nunca el capitán Ortolan. En cambio, ahora, en la guerra, se desquitaba de lo lindo. En verdad, era infatigable. Su ardor, incluso entre tantos otros chiflados, se volvía cada día más señalado. Tomaba cocaína, según contaban también. Pálido y ojeroso, siempre agitado sobre sus frágiles miembros, en cuanto ponía pie a tierra, primero se tambaleaba y después recuperaba el dominio de sí mismo y recorría, rabioso, los surcos en busca de una empresa de bravura. Habría sido capaz de enviarnos a coger fuego en la boca de los cañones de enfrente. Colaboraba con la muerte. Era como para jurar que ésta había firmado un contrato con el capitán Ortolan.

La primera parte de su vida (según me informé) la había pasado en concursos hípicos, rompiéndose las costillas varias veces al año. Las piernas, a fuerza de rompérselas también y de no utilizarlas para andar, habían perdido las pantorrillas. Ya sólo sabía avanzar a pasos nerviosos y de puntillas, como sobre zancos. En tierra, con su desmesurada hopalanda, encorvado bajo la lluvia, era como para confundirlo con la popa fantasmal de un caballo de carreras.

Conviene señalar que, al comienzo de la monstruosa empresa, es decir, en el mes de agosto, hasta septiembre incluso, ciertas horas, días enteros a veces, algunos tramos de carreteras, algunos rincones de bosques, resultaban favorables para los condenados… Podía uno acariciar la ilusión de estar más o menos tranquilo y jalarse, por ejemplo, una lata de conservas con su pan, hasta el final, sin dejarse vencer por el presentimiento de que sería la última. Pero a partir de octubre se acabaron para siempre, esas treguas momentáneas, la granizada se volvió más copiosa, más densa, más trufada, más rellena de obuses y balas. Pronto íbamos a estar en plena tormenta y lo que procurábamos no ver estaría entonces justo delante de nosotros y ya no se podría ver otra cosa: nuestra muerte.

La noche, que tanto habíamos temido en los primeros momentos, se volvía en comparación bastante suave. Acabamos esperándola, deseándola. De noche nos disparaban con menos facilidad que de día. Y ya sólo contaba esa diferencia.

Resultaba difícil llegar a lo esencial, aun en relación con la guerra, la fantasía resiste mucho tiempo.

Los gatos demasiado amenazados por el fuego acaban por fuerza yendo a arrojarse al agua.

De noche, vivíamos aquí y allá cuartos de hora que se parecían bastante a la adorable época de paz, a esa época ya increíble, en que todo era benigno, en que nada tenía importancia en el fondo, en que se sucedían tantas otras cosas, que se habían vuelto, todas, extraordinaria, maravillosamente agradables. Un terciopelo vivo, aquella época de paz…

Pero pronto las noches también sufrieron, a su vez, el acoso sin piedad. Hubo casi siempre que forzar aún más la fatiga de noche, sufrir un pequeño suplemento, aunque sólo fuera para comer, o para echar unas cabezadas en la obscuridad. Llegaba a las líneas de vanguardia, la comida, arrastrándose vergonzosa y pesada, en largos cortejos cojeantes de carromatos inestables, atestados de carne, prisioneros, heridos, avena, arroz y gendarmes, y priva también, en garrafas, que tan bien recuerdan a la juerga, panzudas y dando tumbos.

A pie, los rezagados tras la fragua y el pan y prisioneros de los nuestros, y de ellos también, maniatados, condenados a esto, a lo otro, mezclados, atados por las muñecas al estribo de los gendarmes, algunos para ser fusilados al día siguiente, no más tristes que los otros. También comían ésos, su ración de aquel atún tan difícil de digerir (no les iba a dar tiempo), en espera de que la columna se pusiese en marcha de nuevo, al borde de la carretera… y el mismo y último pan con un civil encadenado a ellos, que, según decían, era un espía y que no comprendía nada. Nosotros tampoco.

La tortura del regimiento continuaba entonces en la forma nocturna, a tientas por las callejuelas accidentadas de la aldea sin luz ni rostro, doblados bajo sacos más pesados que hombres, de un granero desconocido a otro, insultados, amenazados, de uno a otro, azorados, sin la menor esperanza de acabar sino entre las amenazas, el estiércol y el asco por habernos visto torturados, engañados hasta los tuétanos por una horda de locos furiosos, incapaces ya de otra cosa, si acaso, que matar y ser destripados sin saber por qué.

Tendidos en el suelo, entre dos montones de estiércol, pronto nos veíamos obligados, a fuerza de insultos, a fuerza de patadas, por los cerdos de los suboficiales a ponernos de nuevo en pie para cargar más carromatos, aún, de la columna.

La aldea rebosaba comida y escuadrones en la noche abotargada de grasa, manzanas, avena, azúcar, que se habían de cargar a cuestas y repartir por el camino, al paso de los escuadrones. Traía de todo, el convoy, excepto la fuga.

Los de servicio, agotados, se desplomaban en torno al carromato y entonces aparecía el furriel, enfocando el farol por encima de aquellas larvas. Aquel macaco con papada tenía que descubrir, en medio de cualquier caos, abrevaderos. ¡Agua para los caballos! Pero llegué a ver a cuatro de los hombres, con el culo metido y todo, sobando, desvanecidos de sueño, con el agua hasta el cuello.

Después del abrevadero, había que volver a encontrar la alquería y la callejuela por donde habíamos venido y en donde nos parecía haber dejado al escuadrón. Si no encontrábamos nada, teníamos libertad para desplomarnos una vez más junto a un muro, durante una hora sólo, si es que quedaba una, a sobar. En ese oficio de dejarse matar, no hay que ser exigente, hay que hacer como si la vida siguiera, eso es lo más duro, esa mentira.

Y regresaban hacia la retaguardia, los furgones. Huyendo del alba, el convoy reanudaba su marcha, con todas sus torcidas ruedas crujiendo, se iba acompañado por mi deseo de que lo sorprendieran, despedazasen, quemaran, por fin, ese mismo día, como se ve en los grabados militares, saqueado el convoy, para siempre, con toda la comitiva de sus gorilas gendarmes, herraduras y reenganchados con linternas y todo su cargamento de faenas, lentejas y otras harinas, que no había modo de hacer cocer nunca, y no volviéramos a verlo jamás. Ya que, puestos a diñarla de fatiga o de otra cosa, la forma más dolorosa es cargando sacos para llenar con ellos la noche.

El día que los hicieran trizas así, hasta los ejes, a aquellos cabrones, al menos nos dejarían en paz, pensaba yo, y, aunque sólo fuese durante toda una noche, podríamos dormir al menos una vez por entero, en cuerpo y alma.

Una pesadilla más, aquel avituallamiento, pequeño monstruo fastidioso y parásito del gran ogro de la guerra. Brutos delante, al lado y detrás. Los habían distribuido por todas partes. Condenados a una muerte aplazada, ya no podíamos vencer las ganas, enormes, de sobar y todo, además de eso, se volvía sufrimiento, el tiempo y el esfuerzo para comer. Un tramo de riachuelo, una cara de muro que creíamos reconocer… Nos guiábamos por los olores para encontrar otra vez la alquería del escuadrón, transformados en perros en la noche de guerra de las aldeas abandonadas. El que guía aún mejor es el olor a mierda.

El brigada de avituallamiento, guardián de los odios de la tropa, dueño del mundo de momento. Quien habla del porvenir es un tunante, lo que cuenta es el presente. Invocar la posteridad es hacer un discurso a los gusanos. En la noche de la aldea en guerra, el brigada guardaba a los animales humanos para las grandes matanzas que acababan de empezar. ¡Es el rey, el brigada! ¡El Rey de la Muerte! ¡Brigada Cretelle! ¡Exacto! No hay nadie más poderoso. Tan poderoso como él, sólo un brigada de los otros, los de enfrente.

No quedaban con vida en el pueblo sino gatos aterrados. El mobiliario, hecho astillas primero, pasaba a hacer fuego para el rancho, sillas, butacas, aparadores, del más ligero al más pesado. Y todo lo que se podía cargar a la espalda, se lo llevaban, mis compañeros. Peines, lamparitas, tazas, cositas fútiles y hasta coronas de novia, todo valía. Como si aún tuviéramos por delante muchos años de vida. Robaban para distraerse, para hacer ver que aún tenían para rato. Deseos de eternidad.

El cañón para ellos no era sino ruido. Por eso pueden durar las guerras. Ni siquiera quienes las hacen, quienes están haciéndolas, las imaginan. Con una bala en el vientre, habrían seguido recogiendo sandalias viejas por la carretera, que aún «podían servir». Así el cordero, rendido en el prado, agoniza y pace aún. La mayoría de la gente no muere hasta el último momento; otros empiezan veinte años antes y a veces más. Son los desgraciados de la tierra.

Yo, por mi parte, no era demasiado prudente, pero me había vuelto lo bastante práctico como para ser cobarde, en definitiva. Seguramente daba, a causa de esa resolución, impresión de gran serenidad. El caso es que inspiraba, tal como era, una paradójica confianza a nuestro capitán, el propio Ortolan, quien decidió confiarme aquella noche una misión delicada. Se trataba, me explicó, confidencial, de dirigirme al trote antes del amanecer a Noirceur-sur-la-Lys, ciudad de tejedores, situada a catorce kilómetros de la aldea donde estábamos acampados. Debía cerciorarme, en la plaza misma, de la presencia del enemigo. Desde por la mañana los enviados no cesaban de contradecirse al respecto. El general Des Entrayes estaba impaciente. Para ese reconocimiento, se me permitió escoger un caballo de entre los menos purulentos del pelotón. Hacía mucho que no había estado solo. De pronto me pareció que me marchaba de viaje. Pero la liberación era ficticia.

En cuanto me puse en camino, por la fatiga, me costó trabajo, pese a mis esfuerzos, imaginar mi propia muerte, con suficiente precisión y detalle. Avanzaba de árbol en árbol, haciendo ruido con mi chatarra. Ya sólo mi bello sable valía, por el plomo, un piano. Tal vez fuera yo digno de lástima, pero en todo caso, eso seguro, estaba grotesco.

¿En qué estaba pensando el general Des Entrayes para enviarme así, con aquel silencio, completamente cubierto de cimbales? En mí, no, desde luego.

Los aztecas destripaban por lo común, según cuentan, en sus templos del sol, a ochenta mil creyentes por semana, como sacrificio al Dios de las nubes para que les enviara lluvia. Son cosas que cuesta creer antes de ir a la guerra. Pero, una vez en ella, todo se explica, tanto los aztecas como su desprecio por los cuerpos ajenos; el mismo debía de sentir por mis humildes tripas nuestro general Céladon des Entrayes, ya citado, que había llegado a ser, por los ascensos, como un dios concreto, él también, como un pequeño sol atrozmente exigente.

Sólo me quedaba una esperanza muy pequeña, la de que me hiciesen prisionero. Era mínima esa esperanza, un hilo. Un hilo en la noche, pues las circunstancias no se prestaban en absoluto a las cortesías preliminares. En esos momentos recibes antes un tiro de fusil que un saludo con el sombrero. Por lo demás, ¿qué le iba a poder decir yo, a aquel militar hostil por principio y venido a propósito para asesinarme del otro extremo de

Europa?… Si él vacilaba un segundo (que me bastaría), ¿qué le diría yo?… Pero, ante todo, ¿qué sería, en realidad? ¿Un dependiente de almacén? ¿Un reenganchado profesional? ¿Un enterrador tal vez? ¿En la vida civil? ¿Un cocinero?… Los caballos tienen mucha suerte, pues, aunque sufren también la guerra, como nosotros, nadie les pide que la subscriban, que aparenten creer en ella. ¡Desdichados, pero libres, caballos! Por desgracia, el entusiasmo, tan zalamero, ¡es sólo para nosotros!

En ese momento distinguía muy bien la carretera y, además, situados a los lados, sobre el légamo del suelo, los grandes cuadrados y volúmenes de las casas, con paredes blanqueadas por la luna, como grandes trozos de hielo desiguales, todo silencio, en bloques pálidos. ¿Sería allí el fin de todo? ¿Cuánto tiempo pasaría, en aquella soledad, después de que me hubieran apañado? ¿Antes de acabar? ¿Y en qué zanja? ¿Junto a cuál de aquellos muros? ¿Me rematarían tal vez? ¿De una cuchillada? A veces arrancaban las manos, los ojos y lo demás… ¡Se contaban muchas cosas al respecto y nada divertidas! ¿Quién sabe?… Un paso del caballo… Otro más… ¿bastarían? Esos animales trotan como dos hombres con zapatos de hierro y pegados uno al otro, con un paso de gimnasia muy extraño y desigual.

Mi corazón al calorcito, tras su verjita de costillas, conejo agitado, acurrucado, estúpido.

Al tirarte de un salto desde lo alto de la Torre Eiffel, debes de sentir cosas así. Querrías agarrarte al espacio.

Conservó secreta para mí su amenaza, aquella aldea, pero no del todo. En el centro de una plaza, un minúsculo surtidor gorgoteaba para mí solo.

Tenía todo, para mí solo, aquella noche. Era propietario por fin de la luna, de la aldea, de un miedo tremendo. Iba a salir al trote de nuevo (Noirceur-sur-la-Lys debía de estar aún a una hora de camino al menos), cuando advertí un resplandor muy tenue por encima de una puerta. Me dirigí derecho hacia él y así me descubrí una especie de audacia, desertora, cierto, pero insospechada. El resplandor desapareció en seguida, pero yo lo había visto bien. Llamé. Insistí, volví a llamar, interpelé a voces, primero en alemán y luego en francés, por si acaso, a aquellos desconocidos, encerrados tras la sombra.

Por fin se abrió la puerta, un batiente.

«¿Quién es usted?», dijo una voz. Estaba salvado.

«Soy un dragón…»

«¿Francés?» Podía distinguir a la mujer que hablaba.

«Sí, francés…»

«Es que han pasado por aquí tantos dragones alemanes… También hablaban francés, ésos…»

«Sí, pero yo soy francés de verdad…»

«¡Ah!.»

Parecía dudarlo.

«¿Dónde están ahora?», pregunté.

«Se han marchado hacia Noirceur sobre las ocho…» Y me indicaba el Norte con el dedo.

Una muchacha, con delantal blanco y mantón, salía también de la sombra ahora, hasta el umbral de la puerta…

«¿Qué les han hecho -pregunté- los alemanes?»

«Han quemado una casa cerca de la alcaldía y, además, han matado a mi hermanito de una lanzada en el vientre… cuando jugaba en el Puente Rojo y los miraba pasar… ¡Mire! – Y me mostró-. Ahí está…»

No lloraba. Volvió a encender la vela, cuyo resplandor había yo sorprendido. Y distinguí -era cierto- al fondo el pequeño cadáver tendido sobre un colchón y vestido de marinero, y el cuello y la cabeza, tan lívidos como el resplandor de la vela, sobresalían de un gran cuello azul cuadrado. Estaba encogido, el niño, con brazos, piernas y espalda encorvados. La lanza le había pasado, como un eje de la muerte, por el centro del vientre. Su madre lloraba con fuerza, a su lado, de rodillas, y el padre también. Y después se pusieron a gemir todos juntos. Pero yo tenía mucha sed.

«¿Tendrían una botella de vino para venderme?», pregunté.

«Pregúntele a mi madre… Tal vez sepa si queda… Los alemanes nos han cogido mucho hace un rato…»

Y entonces se pusieron a discutir sobre eso en voz muy baja.

«¡No queda! – vino a anunciarme la muchacha-. Los alemanes se lo han llevado todo… Y eso que les habíamos dado sin que lo pidieran y mucho…»

«¡Ah, sí! ¡Lo que han bebido! – comentó la madre, que había dejado de llorar, de repente-. Les gusta mucho…»

«Más de cien botellas, seguro», añadió el padre, que seguía de rodillas…

«Entonces, ¿no queda ni una sola? – insistí, con esperanza aún, pues tenía una sed tremenda, y sobre todo de vino blanco, bien amargo, el que despabila un poco-. Estoy dispuesto a pagar…»

«Ya sólo queda del bueno. Cuesta cinco francos la botella…», concedió entonces la madre.

«¡Muy bien!» Y saqué mis cinco francos del bolsillo, una moneda grande.

«¡Ve a buscar una!», ordenó en voz baja a la hermana.

La hermana cogió la vela y al cabo de un instante subió con una botella de litro.

Estaba servido, ya sólo me quedaba marcharme.

«¿Volverán?», pregunté, de nuevo inquieto.

«Quizá -contestaron a coro-. Pero entonces lo quemarán todo… Lo han prometido al marcharse…»

«Voy a ir a ver.»

«Es usted muy valiente… ¡Es por ahí!», me indicaba el padre, en dirección a Noirceur-sur-la-Lys… Salió incluso a la calzada para verme marchar. La hija y la madre se quedaron, atemorizadas, junto al cadáver del pequeño, en vela.

«¡Vuelve! – le decían desde dentro-. Entra, Joseph, que a ti no se te ha perdido nada en la carretera…»

«Es usted muy valiente», volvió a decirme el padre y me estrechó la mano.

Me puse en camino hacia el Norte, al trote.

«¡Al menos, no les diga que aún estamos aquí!» La muchacha había vuelto a salir para gritarme eso.

«Eso ya lo verán ellos, mañana, si están aquí», respondí. No estaba contento de haber dado mis cinco francos.

Cinco francos se interponían entre nosotros. Son suficientes para odiar, cinco francos, y desear que revienten todos. No hay amor que valga en este mundo, mientras haya cinco francos de por medio.

«¡Mañana!», repetían, incrédulos…

Mañana, para ellos también, estaba lejos, no tenía demasiado sentido, un mañana así. En el fondo, el caso, para todos nosotros, era vivir una hora más, y una sola hora en un mundo en que todo se ha reducido al crimen es ya algo extraordinario.

No duró mucho. Yo trotaba de árbol en árbol y no me habría extrañado verme interpelado o fusilado de un momento a otro. Y se acabó.

No debían de ser más de las dos de la mañana, cuando llegué a la cima de una pequeña colina, al paso. Desde allí distinguí de repente filas y más filas de faroles de gas encendidos abajo y después, en primer plano, una estación iluminada con sus vagones, su cantina, de la que, sin embargo, no llegaba ningún ruido… Nada. Calles, avenidas, farolas y más filas paralelas de luces, barrios enteros, y después el resto alrededor, sólo obscuridad, vacío, ávido en torno a la ciudad, extendida, desplegada ante mí, como si la hubieran perdido, la ciudad, iluminada y esparcida en medio de la noche. Descabalgué y me senté en un cerrito a contemplarla un buen rato.

Seguía sin saber si los alemanes habían entrado en Noirceur, pero, como en esos casos acostumbraban a incendiarlo todo, si habían entrado y no incendiaban la ciudad al instante, quería decir seguramente que tenían ideas y proyectos inhabituales.

Tampoco disparaba el cañón, era extraño.

También mi caballo quería acostarse. Tiraba de la brida y eso me hizo volverme. Cuando volví a mirar hacia la ciudad, algo había cambiado el aspecto del cerro ante mí, no gran cosa, desde luego, pero lo suficiente, aun así, como para que gritara: «¡Eh! ¿Quién vive?…» Ese cambio en la disposición de la sombra se había producido a unos pocos pasos… Debía de ser alguien…

«¡No grites tanto!», respondió una voz de hombre, pastosa y ronca, una voz que parecía muy francesa.

«¿Tú también estás rezagado?», me preguntó. Ahora podía verlo. Era un soldado de infantería, con la visera bien bajada, como los «padres». Después de tantos años, aún recuerdo bien aquel momento, su silueta saliendo de entre la maleza, como hacían los blancos, los soldados, en los tiros de las ferias.

Nos acercamos el uno al otro. Yo llevaba el revólver en la mano. Un poco más y habría disparado sin saber por qué.

«Oye -me preguntó-, ¿los has visto, tú?»

«No, pero vengo por aquí para verlos.»

«¿Eres del 145º de dragones?»

«Sí. ¿Y tú?»

«Yo soy un reservista…»

«¡Ah!», dije. Me sorprendía, un reservista. Era el primero que me encontraba en la guerra. Nosotros siempre habíamos estado con hombres de la activa. No veía yo su figura, pero su voz era ya distinta de las nuestras, como más triste y, por tanto, más aceptable que las nuestras. Por eso, no podía por menos de sentir un poco de confianza hacia él. Ya era algo.

«Estoy harto -repetía-. Me voy a dejar coger por los *boches.»*

No ocultaba nada.

«¿Y cómo vas a hacer?»

De repente, me interesaba, su proyecto, más que nada.

¿Cómo iba a arreglárselas para conseguir que lo apresaran?

«Aún no lo sé…»

«¿Cómo has conseguido largarte?… ¡No es fácil dejarse coger!»

«Me importa un bledo, iré a entregarme.»

«Entonces, ¿tienes miedo?»

«Tengo miedo y, además, esto me parece cosa de locos, si quieres que te diga la verdad. Me tienen sin cuidado los alemanes, no me han hecho nada…»

«Cállate -le dije-, tal vez nos oigan…»

Yo sentía como un deseo de ser cortés con los alemanes. Me habría gustado que me explicara, ya que estaba, aquel reservista, por qué no tenía valor yo tampoco, para hacer la guerra, como todos los demás… Pero no explicaba nada, sólo repetía que estaba hasta la coronilla.

Entonces me contó la desbandada de su regimiento, la víspera, al amanecer, por culpa de los cazadores de a pie, de los nuestros, que por error habían abierto fuego contra su compañía, a campo traviesa. No los esperaban a esa hora. Habían llegado tres horas antes de lo previsto. Entonces los cazadores, fatigados, sorprendidos, los habían acribillado. Yo ya me conocía eso, ya me había pasado.

«Y yo, ¡tú fíjate! Una ocasión así, ¡menudo si la aproveché! – añadió-. "Robinson", me dijo. Me llamo Robinson… ¡Robinson Léon! "Si quieres pirártelas, ¡ahora o nunca!", me dije… ¿No te parece? Conque me metí por un bosquecillo y después allí, tú figúrate, me encontré a nuestro capitán… Estaba apoyado en un árbol, ¡bien jodido el capi!… Estirando la pata… Se sujetaba el pantalón con las dos manos y venga escupir… Sangraba por todo el cuerpo y los ojos le daban vueltas… No había nadie con él. Había recibido una buena… "¡Mamá! ¡Mamá!", lloriqueaba, mientras reventaba y meaba sangre también…

»"¡Corta el rollo!", fui y le dije. "¡Mamá! Sí, sí, ¡en eso está pensando tu mamá!"… ¡Así, chico, al pasar!… ¡En sus narices! ¡Imagínate! ¡Se debió de correr de gusto, aquel cabrón!… ¿No?… No se presentan muchas ocasiones, de decirle lo que piensas, al capitán… Hay que aprovecharlas. Y, para largarme más rápido, tiré el petate y las armas también… En un estanque de patos que había allí al lado… Es que, aquí donde me ves, yo no tengo ganas de matar a nadie, no he aprendido… Ya en tiempos de paz, no me gustaba la camorra… Me marchaba… Conque, ¡ya te puedes imaginar!… En la vida civil, procuraba no faltar a la fábrica… Incluso llegué a ser un grabador discreto, pero no me gustaba, por las disputas, prefería vender los periódicos de la tarde y en un barrio tranquilo, por donde me conocían, cerca del Banco de Francia… Place des Victoires, para ser más exactos… Rué des Petits-Champs… Ésa era mi zona… Nunca pasaba de la Rué du Louvre y el Palais-Royal, por un lado, ya ves tú… Por la mañana, hacía recados para los comerciantes… Por la tarde, un reparto de vez en cuando, a salto de mata, vamos… Alguna chapuza… Pero, ¡a mí que no me hablen de armas!… Si los alemanes te ven con armas, ¿eh? ¡Estás listo! Mientras que cuando vas a la buena de Dios, como yo ahora… Nada en las manos… Nada en los bolsillos… Notan que les costará menos apresarte, ¿comprendes? Saben con quién tienen que habérselas… Si pudieras llegar desnudo hasta los alemanes, sería lo mejor… ¡Como un caballo! Entonces, no podrían saber de qué arma eres…»

«¡Eso es verdad!»

Me daba cuenta de que la edad ayuda para las ideas. Te vuelves práctico.

«Están ahí, ¿no?» Mirábamos y calculábamos juntos nuestras posibilidades y buscábamos nuestro futuro, como en las cartas, en el gran plano luminoso que nos ofrecía la ciudad en silencio.

«¿Vamos?»

En primer lugar había que pasar la línea del ferrocarril. Si había centinelas, nos apuntarían. Tal vez no. Había que ver. Pasar por encima o por debajo, por el túnel.

«Tenemos que darnos prisa -añadió aquel Robinson-. Hay que hacerlo de noche; de día ya no hay amigos, todo el mundo trabaja para la galería; por el día, tú fíjate, hasta en la guerra es la feria… ¿Te llevas el penco?»

Me llevé el penco. Por prudencia, para salir pitando, si no nos recibían bien. Llegamos al paso a nivel, con los grandes brazos rojos y blancos levantados. Nunca había visto barreras de esa forma. Las de las afueras de París no eran así.

«¿Crees tú que habrán entrado ya en la ciudad?»

«¡Seguro! – dijo-. ¡Sigue adelante!…»

Ahora nos veíamos obligados a ser tan valientes como los valientes; el caballo, que avanzaba tranquilo tras nosotros, como si nos empujara con su ruido, no nos dejaba oír nada. ¡Toe! ¡Toe! ¡Toe!, con sus herraduras. Golpeaba en pleno eco, tan campante.

Entonces, ¿contaba con la noche, aquel Robinson, para sacarnos de allí?… íbamos al paso los dos, por el centro de la calle vacía, sin la menor cautela, marcando el paso aún, como en la instrucción.

Tenía razón, Robinson, el día era implacable, de la tierra al cielo. Tal como íbamos por la calzada, debíamos de tener aspecto muy inofensivo, los dos, muy ingenuo incluso, como si volviéramos de permiso.

«¿Te has enterado de que han apresado al 1° de húsares entero?… ¿en Lille?… Entraron así, según dicen, no sabían, ¡eh!, con el coronel delante… ¡Por una calle principal, chico! Los cercaron… Por delante… Por detrás… ¡Alemanes por todos lados!… ¡En las ventanas!… Por todos lados… Listo… ¡Como ratas cayeron!… ¡Como ratas! ¡Tú fíjate qué potra!…»

«¡Ah! ¡Qué cabritos!…»

«¡Tú fíjate! ¡Tú fíjate!…» No salíamos de nuestro asombro ante aquella admirable captura, tan limpia, tan definitiva… Nos había dejado boquiabiertos. Las tiendas tenían todos los postigos cerrados, los hotelitos también, con su jardincillo delante, todo muy limpio. Pero, tras pasar por delante de Correos, vimos que uno de aquellos hotelitos, un poco más blanco que los demás, tenía todas las ventanas iluminadas, tanto en la planta baja como en el entresuelo. Nos acercamos y llamamos a la puerta. Nuestro caballo seguía detrás de nosotros. Un hombre grueso y barbudo nos abrió. «¡Soy el alcalde de Noirceur -fue y anunció al instante, sin que le preguntáramos- y estoy esperando a los alemanes!» Y salió, el alcalde, al claro de luna para reconocernos. Cuando comprobó que no éramos alemanes, sino franceses, no se mostró tan solemne, sólo cordial. Y también cohibido. Evidentemente, ya no nos esperaba, nuestra llegada contrariaba las disposiciones y resoluciones que había tenido que adoptar. Los alemanes debían entrar en Noirceur aquella noche, estaba avisado y había dispuesto todo de acuerdo con la Prefectura, su coronel aquí, su ambulancia allá, etc… ¿Y si entraban en aquel momento? ¿Estando nosotros allí? ¡Seguro que crearía dificultades! Provocaría complicaciones… No nos lo dijo a las claras, pero se veía que lo pensaba.

Entonces se puso a hablarnos del interés general, allí, en plena noche, en el silencio en que estábamos perdidos. Sólo del interés general… De los bienes materiales de la comunidad… Del patrimonio artístico de Noirceur, confiado a su cargo, cargo sagrado donde lo hubiera… De la iglesia del siglo XV, sobretodo… ¿La quemarían, la iglesia del siglo XV? ¡Como la de Condé-sur-Yser, allí cerca! ¿Eh?… Por simple mal humor… Por despecho, al encontrarnos allí… Nos hizo sentir toda la responsabilidad en que incurríamos… ¡Inconscientes soldados jóvenes que éramos!… A los alemanes no les gustaban las ciudades sospechosas, por las que aún merodearan militares enemigos. Ya se sabía.

Mientras nos hablaba así, a media voz, su mujer y sus dos hijas, rubias llenitas y apetitosas, se mostraban de perfecto acuerdo, con una palabra de vez en cuando… En resumen, nos echaban. Entre nosotros flotaban los valores sentimentales y arqueológicos, vitales de repente, pues ya no quedaba nadie en Noirceur para impugnarlos… Patrióticos, morales, estimulados por las palabras, fantasmas que intentaba atrapar, el alcalde, pero que se esfumaban al punto, vencidos por nuestro miedo y nuestro egoísmo y también por la verdad pura y simple.

Hacía esfuerzos extenuantes y conmovedores, el alcalde de Noirceur, para intentar convencernos, con pasión, de que nuestro deber era, sin

lugar a dudas, largarnos en seguida con viento fresco y a todos los diablos, menos brutal, desde luego, que nuestro comandante Pinçon, pero tan decidido en su género.

Lo único seguro que oponer, a todos aquellos poderosos, era, sin duda, nuestro humilde deseo de no morir ni arder. Era poco, sobre todo porque esas cosas no pueden declararse durante la guerra. Conque nos encaminamos hacia otras calles vacías. La verdad era que todas las personas con las que me había encontrado aquella noche me habían revelado su alma.

«¡Mira que tengo suerte! – comentó Robinson, cuando nos íbamos-. ¡Ya ves! Si tú hubieras sido un alemán, como también eres buen muchacho, me habrías hecho prisionero y todo habría acabado bien… ¡Cuesta deshacerse de uno mismo en la guerra!»

«Y tú -le dije-, si hubieras sido un alemán, ¿no me habrías hecho prisionero también? Entonces, ¡a lo mejor te habrían concedido su medalla militar! Debe de llamarse con un nombre extraño en alemán su medalla militar, ¿no?»

Como seguíamos sin encontrar por el camino a alguien que quisiera hacernos prisioneros, acabamos sentándonos en un banco de una placita y nos comimos la lata de atún que Robinson Léon paseaba y calentaba en el bolsillo desde la mañana. Muy lejos, se oía el cañón ahora, pero muy lejos, la verdad. ¡Si hubieran podido quedarse cada cual por su lado, los enemigos, y dejarnos tranquilos!

Después seguimos a lo largo de un canal y, junto a las gabarras a medio descargar, orinamos, con largos chorros, en el agua. Seguíamos llevando el caballo de la brida, tras nosotros, como un perro muy grande, pero cerca del puente, en la casa del barquero, de un solo cuarto, también sobre un colchón, estaba tendido otro muerto, solo, un francés, comandante de cazadores a caballo, que, por cierto, se parecía bastante a Robinson, de cara.

«¡Mira que es feo! – comentó Robinson-. A mí no me gustan los muertos…»

«Lo más curioso -le respondí- es que se te parece un poco. Tiene la nariz larga como tú y tú no eres mucho menos joven que él…»

«La fatiga me hace parecer así; cansados todos nos parecemos un poco, pero si me hubieras visto antes… ¡Cuando montaba en bicicleta todos los domingos!… ¡Era un chavea que no estaba mal! Chico, ¡tenía unas pantorrillas! ¡El deporte, claro! También desarrolla los muslos…»

Volvimos a salir; la cerilla que habíamos cogido para mirar se había apagado.

«¡Ya ves! ¡Es demasiado tarde!…»

Una larga raya gris y verde subrayaba ya a lo lejos la cresta del otero, en el límite de la ciudad, en la noche. ¡El día! ¡Uno más! ¡Uno menos! Habría que intentar pasar a través de aquél como de los demás, convertidos en algo así como aros cada vez más estrechos, los días, y atestados de trayectorias y metralla.

«¿No vas a venir por aquí la próxima noche?», me preguntó al separarse de mí.

«¡No hay próxima noche, hombre!… ¿Es que te crees un general?»

«Yo ya no pienso en nada -dijo, para acabar-. En nada, ¿me oyes?… Sólo pienso en no palmarla… Ya es bastante… Me digo que un día ganado, ¡es un día más!» «Tienes razón… ¡Adiós, chico, y suerte!…» «¡Lo mismo te digo! ¡Tal vez nos volvamos a ver!» Volvimos cada uno a nuestra guerra. Y después ocurrieron cosas y más cosas, que no es fácil contar ahora, pues hoy ya no se comprenderían.

Para estar bien vistos y considerados, tuvimos que darnos prisa y hacernos muy amigos de los civiles, porque éstos, en la retaguardia, se volvían, a medida que avanzaba la guerra, cada vez más perversos. Lo comprendí en seguida, al regresar a París, y también que las mujeres tenían fuego entre las piernas y los viejos una cara de salidos que para qué y las manos a lo suyo: los culos, los bolsillos.

Heredaban de los combatientes, los de la retaguardia, no habían tardado en aprender la gloria y las formas adecuadas de soportarla con valor y sin dolor.

Las madres, unas enfermeras, otras mártires, no se quitaban nunca sus largos velos sombríos, como tampoco el diploma que les enviaba el ministro a tiempo por mediación del empleado de la alcaldía. En resumen, se iban organizando las cosas.

Durante los funerales pomposos, la gente está muy triste también, pero no por ello dejan de pensar en la herencia, en las próximas vacaciones, en la viuda, que es muy mona y tiene temperamento, según dicen, y en seguir viviendo, uno mismo, por contraste, largo tiempo, en no diñarla tal vez nunca… ¿Quién sabe?

Cuando sigues un entierro, todo el mundo se descubre, ceremonioso, para saludarte. Da gusto. Es el momento de comportarse como Dios manda, de adoptar expresión de decoro y no bromear en voz alta, de regocijarse sólo por dentro. Está permitido. Por dentro todo está permitido.

En época de guerra, en lugar de bailar en el entresuelo, se bailaba en el sótano. Los combatientes lo toleraban y, más aún, les gustaba. Lo pedían, en cuanto llegaban, y a nadie parecía impropio. En el fondo, sólo el valor es impropio. ¿Ser valiente con tu cuerpo? Entonces pedid al gusano que sea valiente también; es rosado, pálido y blando, como nosotros.

Por mi parte, yo ya no tenía motivos para quejarme. Estaba a punto de liberarme, gracias a la medalla militar que había ganado, la herida y demás. Estando en convalecencia, me la habían llevado, la medalla, al hospital. Y el mismo día me fui al teatro, a enseñársela a los civiles en los entreactos. Gran sensación. Eran las primeras medallas que se veían en París. ¡Un chollete!

Fue en aquella ocasión incluso cuando, en el salón de la Opéra-Comique, conocí a la pequeña Lola de América y por ella me espabilé del todo.

Hay ciertas fechas así, en la vida, que cuentan entre tantos meses en los que habría podido uno abstenerse muy bien de vivir. Aquel día de la medalla en la Opéra-Comique fue decisivo en mi vida.

Por ella, por Lola, me entró gran curiosidad por Estados Unidos, por las preguntas que le hacía y a las que ella apenas respondía. Cuando te lanzas así, a los viajes, vuelves cuando puedes y como puedes…

En el momento de que hablo, todo el mundo en París quería poseer su uniforme. Los únicos que no tenían eran los neutrales y los espías y eran casi los mismos. Lola tenía el suyo, su uniforme oficial de verdad, y muy mono, todo él adornado con crucecitas rojas, en las mangas, en su gorrito de policía, siempre ladeado, coquetón, sobre sus ondulados cabellos. Había venido a ayudarnos a salvar a Francia, como decía al director del hotel, en la medida de sus débiles fuerzas, pero, ¡con todo el corazón! Nos entendimos en seguida, si bien no del todo, porque los arrebatos del corazón habían llegado a resultarme de lo más desagradables. Prefería los del cuerpo, sencillamente. Hay que desconfiar por entero del corazón, me lo habían enseñado, ¡y de qué modo!, en la guerra. Y no me iba a ser fácil olvidarlo.

El corazón de Lola era tierno, débil y entusiasta. Su cuerpo era gracioso, muy amable, y hube de tomarla, en conjunto, como era. Al fin y al cabo, era buena chica, Lola; sólo, que entre nosotros se interponía la guerra, esa rabia de la hostia, tremenda, que impulsaba a la mitad de los humanos, amantes o no, a enviar a la otra mitad al matadero. Conque, por fuerza, entorpecía las relaciones, una manía así. Para mí, que prolongaba mi convalecencia lo más posible y no sentía el menor interés por volver a ocupar mi puesto en el ardiente cementerio de las batallas, el ridículo de nuestra matanza se me revelaba, chillón, a cada paso que daba por la ciudad. Una picardía inmensa se extendía por todos lados.

Sin embargo, tenía pocas posibilidades de eludirla, carecía de las relaciones indispensables para salir bien librado. Sólo conocía a pobres, es decir, gente cuya muerte no interesa a nadie. En cuanto a Lola, no había que contar con ella para enchufarme. Siendo como era enfermera, no se podía imaginar una persona, salvo el propio Ortolan, más combativo que aquella niña encantadora. Antes de haber pasado el fangoso fregado de los heroísmos, su aire de Juana de Arco me habría podido excitar, convertir, pero ahora, desde mi alistamiento de la Place Clichy, cualquier heroísmo verbal o real me inspiraba un rechazo fóbico. Estaba curado, bien curado.

Para comodidad de las damas del cuerpo expedicionario americano, el grupo de enfermeras al que pertenecía Lola se alojaba en el hotel Paritz y, para facilitarle, a ella en particular, aún más las cosas, le confiaron (estaba bien relacionada) en el propio hotel la dirección de un servicio especial, el de los buñuelos de manzana para los hospitales de París. Todas las mañanas se distribuían miles de docenas. Lola desempeñaba esa función benéfica con un celo que, por cierto, más adelante iba a tener efectos desastrosos.

Lola, conviene señalarlo, no había hecho buñuelos en su vida. Así, pues, contrató a algunas cocineras mercenarias y, tras algunos ensayos, los buñuelos estuvieron listos para ser entregados con puntualidad, jugosos, dorados y azucarados, que era un primor. En resumen, Lola sólo tenía que probarlos antes de que se enviaran a los diferentes servicios hospitalarios. Todas las mañanas Lola se levantaba a las diez y, tras haberse bañado, bajaba a las cocinas, situadas muy abajo, junto a los sótanos. Eso, cada mañana, ya digo, y vestida sólo con un quimono japonés negro y amarillo que un amigo de San Francisco le había regalado la víspera de su partida.

En resumen, todo marchaba perfectamente y estábamos ganando la guerra, cuando un buen día, a la hora de almorzar, la encontré descompuesta, incapaz de probar un solo plato de la comida. Me asaltó la aprensión de que hubiera ocurrido una desgracia, una enfermedad repentina. Le supliqué que se confiara a mi afecto vigilante.

Por haber probado, puntual, los buñuelos durante todo un mes, Lola había engordado más de un kilo. Por lo demás, su cinturoncito atestiguaba, con una muesca más, el desastre. Vinieron las lágrimas. Intentando consolarla, como mejor pude, recorrimos, en taxi y bajo el efecto de la emoción, varias farmacias, situadas en lugares muy diversos. Por azar, todas las básculas confirmaron, implacables, que había ganado sin duda más

de un kilo, era innegable. Entonces le sugerí que dejara su servicio a una colega que, al contrario, necesitaba entrar en carnes un poquito. Lola no quiso ni oír hablar de ese compromiso, que consideraba una vergüenza y una auténtica deserción en su género. Fue en aquella ocasión incluso cuando me contó que su tío bisabuelo había formado parte también de la tripulación, por siempre gloriosa, del *Mayflower,* arribado a Boston en 1677, y que, en consideración de tal recuerdo, no podía ni pensar en eludir su deber en relación con los buñuelos, modesto, desde luego, pero, aun así, sagrado.

El caso es que a partir de aquel día ya sólo probaba los buñuelos con la punta de los dientes, todos muy bonitos, por cierto, y bien alineados. Aquella angustia por engordar había llegado a impedirle disfrutar de nada. Desmejoró. Al cabo de poco, tenía tanto miedo a los buñuelos como yo a los obuses. Entonces la mayoría de las veces nos íbamos a pasear por higiene, para rehuir los buñuelos, a las orillas del río, por los bulevares, pero ya no entrábamos en el Napolitain, para no tomar helados, que también hacen engordar a las damas.

Yo nunca había soñado con algo tan confortable para vivir como su habitación, toda ella azul pálido, con un baño contiguo. Fotos de sus amigos por todos lados, dedicatorias, pocas mujeres, muchos hombres, chicos guapos, morenos y de pelo rizado, su tipo; me hablaba del color de sus ojos y de sus dedicatorias tiernas, solemnes y definitivas, todas. Al principio, por educación, me sentía cohibido, en medio de todas aquellas efigies, y después te acostumbras.

En cuanto dejaba de besarla, ella volvía a la carga sobre los asuntos de la guerra o los buñuelos y yo no la interrumpía. Francia entraba en nuestras conversaciones. Para Lola, Francia seguía siendo una especie de entidad caballeresca, de contornos poco definidos en el espacio y el tiempo, pero en aquel momento herida grave y, por eso mismo, muy excitante. Yo, cuando me hablaban de Francia, pensaba, sin poderlo resistir, en mis tripas, conque, por fuerza, era mucho más reservado en lo relativo al entusiasmo. Cada cual con su terror. No obstante, como era complaciente con el sexo, la escuchaba sin contradecirla nunca. Pero, tocante al alma, no la contentaba en absoluto. Muy vibrante, muy radiante le habría gustado que fuera y, por mi parte, yo no veía por qué había de encontrarme en ese estado, sublime; al contrario, veía mil razones, todas irrefutables, para conservar el humor exactamente contrario.

Al fin y al cabo, Lola no hacía otra cosa que divagar sobre la felicidad y el optimismo, como todas las personas pertenecientes a la raza de los escogidos, la de los privilegios, la salud, la seguridad, y que tienen toda la vida por delante.

Me fastidiaba, machacona, a propósito de las cosas del alma, siempre las tenía en los labios. El alma es la vanidad y el placer del cuerpo, mientras goza de buena salud, pero es también el deseo de salir de él, en cuanto se pone enfermo o las cosas salen mal. De las dos posturas, adoptas la que te resulta más agradable en el momento, ¡y se acabó! Mientras puedes elegir, perfecto. Pero yo ya no podía elegir, ¡mi suerte estaba echada! Estaba de parte de la verdad hasta la médula, hasta el punto de que mi propia muerte me seguía, por así decir, paso a paso. Me costaba mucho trabajo no pensar sino en mi destino de asesinado con sentencia en suspenso, que, por cierto, a todo el mundo le parecía del todo normal para mí.

Hay que haber sobrellevado esa especie de agonía diferida, lúcida, con buena salud, durante la cual es imposible comprender otra cosa que verdades absolutas, para saber para siempre lo que se dice.

Mi conclusión era que los alemanes podían llegar aquí, degollar, saquear, incendiar todo, el hotel, los buñuelos, a Lola, las Tullerías, a los ministros, a sus amiguetes, la Coupole, el Louvre, los grandes almacenes, caer sobre la ciudad, como la ira divina, el fuego del infierno, sobre aquella feria asquerosa, a la que ya no se podía añadir, la verdad, nada más sórdido, y, aun así, yo no tenía nada que perder, la verdad, nada, y todo que ganar.

No se pierde gran cosa, cuando arde la casa del propietario. Siempre vendrá otro, si no es el mismo, alemán o francés o inglés o chino, para presentar, verdad, su recibo en el momento oportuno… ¿En marcos o francos? Puesto que hay que pagar…

En resumen, estaba más baja que la leche, la moral. Si le hubiera dicho lo que pensaba de la guerra, a Lola, me habría considerado un monstruo, sencillamente, y me habría negado las últimas dulzuras de su intimidad. Así, pues, me guardaba muy mucho de confesárselo. Por otra parte, aún sufría algunas dificultades y rivalidades. Algunos oficiales intentaban soplármela, a Lola. Su competencia era temible, armados como estaban, ellos, con las seducciones de su Legión de Honor. Además, se empezó a hablar mucho de esa dichosa Legión de Honor en los periódicos americanos. Creo incluso que, en dos o tres ocasiones en que me puso los cuernos, se habrían visto muy amenazadas, nuestras relaciones, si al mismo tiempo no me hubiera descubierto de repente aquella frívola una utilidad superior, la que consistía en probar por ella los buñuelos todas las mañanas.

Esa especialización de última hora me salvó. Aceptó que yo la substituyese. ¿Acaso no era yo también un valeroso combatiente, digno, por tanto, de esa misión de confianza? A partir de entonces ya no fuimos sólo amantes, sino también socios. Así se iniciaron los tiempos modernos.

Su cuerpo era para mí un gozo que no tenía fin. Nunca me cansaba de recorrer aquel cuerpo americano. Era, a decir verdad, un cachondón redomado. Y seguí siéndolo.

Llegué incluso al convencimiento, muy agradable y reconfortante, de que un país capaz de producir cuerpos tan audaces en su gracia y de una elevación espiritual tan tentadora debía de ofrecer muchas otras revelaciones capitales: en el sentido biológico, se entiende.

A fuerza de sobar a Lola, decidí emprender tarde o temprano el viaje a Estados Unidos, como un auténtico peregrinaje y en cuanto fuera posible. En efecto, no paré ni descansé (a lo largo de una vida implacablemente adversa y aperreada) hasta haber llevado a cabo esa profunda aventura, místicamente anatómica.

Recibí así, muy juntito al trasero de Lola, el mensaje de un nuevo mundo. No es que tuviera sólo un cuerpo, Lola, entendámonos, estaba adornada también con una cabecita preciosa y un poco cruel por los ojos de color azul grisáceo, que le subían un poquito hacia los ángulos, como los de los gatos salvajes.

Sólo con mirarla a la cara se me hacía la boca agua, como por un regusto de vino seco, de sílex. Ojos duros, en resumen, y nada animados por esa graciosa vivacidad comercial, que recuerda a Oriente y a Fragonard, de casi todos los ojos de por aquí.

Nos encontrábamos la mayoría de las veces en un café cercano. Los heridos, cada vez más numerosos, iban renqueando por las calles, con frecuencia desaliñados. En su favor se organizaban colectas, «Jornadas» para éstos, para los otros, y sobre todo para los organizadores de las «Jornadas». Mentir, follar, morir. Acababa de prohibirse emprender cualquier otra cosa. Se mentía con ganas, más allá de lo imaginable, mucho más allá del ridículo y del absurdo, en los periódicos, en los carteles, a pie, a caballo, en coche. Todo el mundo se había puesto manos a la obra. A ver quién decía mentiras más inauditas. Pronto ya no quedó verdad alguna en la ciudad.

La poca que existía en 1914 ahora daba vergüenza. Todo lo que tocabas estaba falsificado, el azúcar, los aviones, las sandalias, las mermeladas, las fotos; todo lo que se leía, tragaba, chupaba, admiraba, proclamaba, refutaba, defendía, no eran sino fantasmas odiosos, falsificaciones y mascaradas. Hasta los traidores eran falsos. El delirio de mentir y creer se contagia como la sarna. La pequeña Lola sólo sabía algunas frases de francés, pero eran patrióticas: *«On les aura!…» «Madelon, viens!…»* Era como para echarse a llorar.

Se inclinaba así sobre nuestra muerte con obstinación, impudor, como todas las mujeres, por lo demás, en cuanto llega la moda de ser valientes para los demás.

¡Y yo que precisamente me descubría tanto gusto por todas las cosas que me alejaban de la guerra! En varias ocasiones le pedí informaciones sobre su América a Lola, pero entonces sólo me respondía con comentarios de lo más vagos, pretenciosos y manifiestamente inciertos, destinados a causar en mí una impresión brillante.

Pero ahora yo desconfiaba de las impresiones. Me habían atrapado una vez con la impresión, ya no me iban a coger más con camelos. Nadie.

Yo creía en su cuerpo, pero no en su espíritu. La consideraba una enchufada encantadora, la Lola, a contracorriente de la guerra, de la vida.

Ella atravesaba mi angustia con la mentalidad del *Petit Journal:* pompón, charanga, mi Lorena y guantes blancos… Entretanto, yo le echaba cada vez más caliches, porque le había asegurado que eso la haría adelgazar. Pero ella confiaba más en nuestros largos paseos para conseguirlo. En cambio, yo los detestaba, los largos paseos. Pero ella insistía.

Así, que íbamos con frecuencia, muy deportivos, al Bois de Boulogne, durante algunas horas, todas las tardes, el «circuito de los lagos».

La naturaleza es algo espantoso e incluso cuando está domesticada con firmeza, como en el Bois, aún produce como angustia a los auténticos ciudadanos. Entonces se entregan con facilidad a las confidencias. Nada como el Bois de Boulogne, aun húmedo, enrejado, grasiento y pelado como está, para hacer afluir los recuerdos, incontenibles, en los ciudadanos de paseo entre los árboles. Lola no estaba libre de esa inquietud melancólica y confidente. Me contó mil cosas más o menos sinceras, mientras nos paseábamos así, sobre su vida de Nueva York, sobre sus amiguitas de allá.

Yo no conseguía discernir del todo lo verosímil, en aquella trama complicada de dólares, noviazgos, divorcios, compras de vestidos y joyas, que me parecía colmar su existencia.

Aquel día fuimos hacia el hipódromo. Por aquellos parajes te encontrabas aún muchos simones, a niños sobre borricos y a otros niños

levantando polvo y autos atestados de quintos de permiso que no cesaban de buscar a toda velocidad mujeres vacantes por los senderos, entre dos trenes, levantando aún más polvo, con prisa por ir a cenar y hacer el amor, agitados y viscosos, al acecho, atormentados por la hora implacable y el deseo de vida. Sudaban de pasión y de calor también.

El Bois estaba menos cuidado que de costumbre, abandonado, en suspenso administrativo.

«Este lugar debía de ser muy bonito antes de la guerra… -observaba Lola-. ¿Era elegante?… ¡Cuéntame, Ferdinand!… ¿Y las carreras de aquí?… ¿Eran como las de Nueva York?…»

La verdad es que yo no había ido nunca a las carreras antes de la guerra, pero inventaba al instante, para distraerla, cien detalles vistosos al respecto, con ayuda de lo que me habían contado, unos y otros. Los vestidos… Las señoras elegantes… Las calesas resplandecientes… La salida… Las cornetas alegres y espontáneas… El salto del río… El Presidente de la República… La fiebre ondulante de las apuestas, etc.

Le gustó tanto, mi descripción ideal, que aquel relato nos unió. A partir de aquel momento, creyó haber descubierto, Lola, que por lo menos teníamos un gusto en común, en mí bien disimulado, el de las solemnidades mundanas. Incluso me besó, espontánea, de emoción, cosa que muy raras veces hacía, debo decirlo. Y también la melancolía de las cosas de moda en el pasado la emocionaba. Cada cual llora a su modo el tiempo que pasa. Por las modas muertas advertía Lola el paso de los años.

«Ferdinand -me preguntó-, ¿crees que volverá a haber carreras en este hipódromo?»

«Cuando acabe la guerra, seguramente, Lola…»

«No es seguro, ¿verdad?»

«No, seguro, no…»

Esa posibilidad de que no volviese a haber nunca carreras en Longchamp la desconcertaba. La tristeza del mundo se apodera de los seres como puede, pero parece lograrlo casi siempre.

«Suponte que aún dure mucho la guerra, Ferdinand, años, por ejemplo… Entonces será muy tarde para mí… Para volver aquí… ¿Me comprendes, Ferdinand?… Me gustan tanto, verdad, los lugares bonitos como éste… Muy mundanos… Muy elegantes… Será demasiado tarde… Para siempre demasiado tarde… Tal vez… Seré vieja entonces, Ferdinand. Cuando se reanuden las reuniones… Seré ya vieja… Ya verás, Ferdinand, será demasiado tarde… Siento que será demasiado tarde…»

Y ya estaba otra vez desconsolada, como por el kilo y medio de más. Yo le daba, para tranquilizarla, todas las esperanzas que se me ocurrían… Que si, al fin y al cabo, sólo tenía veintitrés años… Que si la guerra iba a pasar muy deprisa… Que si volverían los buenos tiempos… Como antes, mejores que antes. Al menos para ella… Con lo preciosa que era… ¡El tiempo perdido! ¡Lo recuperaría sin perjuicio!… Los homenajes… Las admiraciones no iban a faltarle tan pronto… Fingió no sentir más pena para complacerme.

«¿Tenemos que andar aún?», me preguntaba.

«¿Para adelgazar?»

«¡Ah! Es verdad, se me olvidaba…»

Abandonamos Longchamp, los niños se habían marchado de los alrededores. Ya sólo había polvo. Los de permiso seguían persiguiendo la felicidad, pero ahora fuera de los oquedales; acosada debía de estar, la felicidad, entre las terrazas de la Porte Maillot.

Íbamos costeando las orillas hacia Saint-Cloud, veladas por el halo danzante de las brumas que suben del otoño. Cerca del puente, algunas gabarras tocaban con la nariz los árboles, muy hundidas en el agua por la carga de carbón que les llegaba hasta la borda.

El inmenso abanico verde del parque se despliega por encima de las verjas. Esos árboles tienen la agradable amplitud y la fuerza de los grandes sueños. Sólo, que también de los árboles desconfiaba yo, desde que había pasado por sus emboscadas. Un muerto detrás de cada árbol. La gran alameda subía entre dos hileras rosas hacia las fuentes. Junto al quiosco, la anciana señora de los refrescos parecía reunir despacio todas las sombras de la tarde en torno a su falda. Más allá, en los caminos contiguos, flotaban los grandes cubos y rectángulos tendidos con lonas obscuras, las barracas de una feria a la que la guerra había sorprendido allí y había inundado de silencio de repente.

«¡Ya hace un año que se marcharon! – nos recordaba la vieja de los refrescos-. Ahora no pasan dos personas al día por aquí… Yo vengo aún por la costumbre… ¡Se veía tanta gente por aquí!…»

No había comprendido nada, la vieja, de lo que había ocurrido, salvo eso. Lola quiso que pasáramos junto a aquellas barracas vacías, un extraño deseo triste tenía.

Contamos unas veinte, unas largas y adornadas con espejos, otras pequeñas, mucho más numerosas, confiterías ambulantes, loterías, un teatrito incluso, atravesado por corrientes de aire; por todos lados, entre los árboles, había barracas; una de ellas, cerca de la gran alameda, ya ni siquiera conservaba las cortinas, descubierta como un antiguo misterio.

Ya se inclinaban hacia las hojas y el barro, las barracas. Nos detuvimos junto a la última, la que se inclinaba más que las otras y se bamboleaba sobre sus postes, al viento, como un barco, con las velas hinchadas, a punto de romper su última cuerda. Vacilaba, su lona del medio, se agitaba con el viento levantado, se agitaba hacia el cielo, por encima del techo. Encima de la entrada de la barraca se leía su antiguo nombre en verde y rojo; era una barraca de tiro: *Le Stand des Nations,* se llamaba.

Ya no había nadie para cuidarla. Ahora tal vez estuviera disparando con los demás propietarios, el dueño, y con los clientes.

¡Qué de balas habían recibido las dianas de la barraca! ¡Todas acribilladas por puntitos blancos! Una boda, en broma, representaba: en la primera fila, de zinc, la novia con sus flores, el primo, el militar, el novio, con carota colorada, y después, en la segunda fila, más invitados, a los que debían de haber matado muchas veces, cuando aún duraba la fiesta.

«Estoy segura de que tú tiras bien, ¿eh, Ferdinand? Si aún hubiera fiesta, ¡te echaría una partida!… ¿Verdad que tiras bien, Ferdinand?»

«No, no tiro demasiado bien…»

En la última fila, detrás de la boda, otra hilera pintarrajeada, la alcaldía con su bandera. Debían de disparar también a la alcaldía, cuando funcionaba la barraca, a las ventanas, que entonces se abrían con un campanillazo seco, a la banderita de zinc disparaban incluso. Y, además, al regimiento que desfilaba, cuesta abajo, al lado, como el mío, el de la Place Clichy, éste entre pipas *y* globos, a todo aquello habían disparado de lo lindo y ahora me disparaban a mí, ayer, mañana.

«Contra mí también disparan, Lola», no pude por menos de gritarle.

«¡Ven! – dijo ella entonces-. Estás diciendo tonterías, Ferdinand, y vamos a coger frío.»

Bajamos hacia Saint-Cloud por la gran alameda, la Royale, evitando el barro, ella me llevaba de la mano, la suya era muy pequeña, pero yo ya no podía pensar sino en la boda de zinc del *Stand* de más arriba, que habíamos dejado en la sombra de la alameda. Incluso me olvidé de besar a Lola, era superior a mis fuerzas. Me sentía muy raro. Fue incluso a partir de aquel instante, me parece, cuando mi cabeza se volvió tan difícil de tranquilizar, con sus ideas dentro.

Cuando llegamos al puente de Saint-Cloud, ya estaba del todo obscuro.

«Ferdinand, ¿quieres cenar en Duval? Te gusta mucho Duval… Esto te distraerá un poco… Siempre se encuentra a mucha gente allí… ¿A menos que prefieras cenar en mi habitación?» En resumen, que se mostraba muy atenta, aquella noche.

Al final, decidimos ir a Duval. Pero apenas nos habíamos sentado a la mesa, cuando el lugar me pareció disparatado. Toda aquella gente sentada en filas a nuestro alrededor me daba la impresión de esperar, también ellos, a que las balas los asaltaran de todos lados, mientras jalaban.

«¡Marchaos todos! – les avisé-. ¡Largaos! ¡Van a disparar! ¡A mataros! ¡A matarnos a todos!»

Me llevaron al hotel de Lola, aprisa. Yo veía por todos lados la misma cosa. Toda la gente que desfilaba por los pasillos del Paritz parecía ir a que le dispararan y los empleados tras la gran Caja, ellos también, puestos allí para ello, y el tipo de abajo incluso, del Paritz, con su uniforme azul como el cielo y dorado como el sol, el portero, como lo llamaban, y, además, militares, oficiales que pasaban, generales, menos apuestos que él, desde luego, pero de uniforme, de todos modos, por todos lados un disparo inmenso, del que no saldríamos, ni unos ni otros. Ya no era broma.

«¡Van a disparar! – fui y les grité, con todas mis fuerzas, en medio del gran salón-. ¡Van a disparar! ¡Largaos todos!…» Y después por la ventana, fui y lo grité también. No podía contenerme. Un auténtico escándalo. «¡Pobre soldado!», decían. El portero me llevó al bar con buenos modales, con amabilidad. Me hizo beber y bebí de lo lindo y, por fin, vinieron los gendarmes a buscarme, más brutales ésos. En el *Stand des Nations* había también gendarmes. Yo los había visto. Lola me besó y los ayudó a llevarme esposado.

Entonces caí enfermo, febril, enloquecido, según explicaron en el hospital, por el miedo. Era posible. Lo mejor que puedes hacer, verdad, cuando estás en este mundo, es salir de el. Loco o no, con miedo o sin él.

Se habló mucho del caso. Unos dijeron: «Ese muchacho es un anarquista, conque vamos a fusilarlo, es el

momento, y rápido, sin vacilar ni dar largas al asunto, ¡que estamos en guerra!…» Pero según otros, más pacientes, era un simple sifilítico y loco sincero y, en consecuencia, querían que me encerraran hasta que llegase la paz o al menos por unos meses, porque ellos, los cuerdos, que no habían perdido la razón, según decían, querían cuidarme y, mientras, ellos harían la guerra solos. Eso demuestra que, para que te consideren razonable, nada mejor que tener una cara muy dura. Cuando tienes la cara bien dura, es bastante, entonces casi todo te está permitido, absolutamente todo, tienes a la mayoría de tu parte y la mayoría es quien decreta lo que es locura y lo que no lo es.

Sin embargo, mi diagnóstico seguía siendo dudoso. Así, pues, las autoridades decidieron ponerme en observación por un tiempo. Mi amiga Lola tuvo permiso para hacerme algunas visitas y mi madre también. Y listo.

Nos alojábamos, los heridos trastornados, en un instituto escolar de Issy-les-Moulineaux, organizado a propósito para recibir y obligar de grado o por fuerza, según los casos, a confesar a los soldados de mi clase, cuyo ideal patriótico estaba en entredicho simplemente o del todo enfermo. No nos trataban mal del todo, pero nos sentíamos, de todas formas, acechados por un personal de enfermeros silenciosos y dotados de orejas enormes.

Tras un tiempo de sometimiento a aquella vigilancia, salías discretamente o para el manicomio o para el frente o, con bastante frecuencia, para el paredón.

Yo no dejaba de preguntarme cuál de los compañeros reunidos en aquellos locales sospechosos, y que hablaban solos y en voz baja en el refectorio, estaba convirtiéndose en un fantasma.

Cerca de la verja, en la entrada, vivía, en su casita, la portera, la que nos vendía pirulíes y naranjas y lo necesario para cosernos los botones. Nos vendía algo más: placer. Para los suboficiales costaba diez francos el placer. Todo el mundo podía disfrutarlos. Sólo que andándose con ojo con las confidencias, que se le hacían con demasiada facilidad en esos momentos. Podían costar caras, esas expansiones. Lo que se le confiaba lo repetía al médico jefe, escrupulosamente, e iba derechito al expediente para el consejo de guerra. Estaba demostrado, al parecer, que había mandado fusilar así, a fuerza de confidencias, a un cabo de espahíes que no había cumplido los veinte años, más un reservista de ingenieros que se había tragado clavos para dañarse el estómago y también a otro histérico, el que le había contado cómo preparaba sus ataques de parálisis en el frente… A mí, para tantearme, me ofreció una noche la cartilla de un padre de familia con seis hijos, muerto, según decía, y que me podía servir para un destino en la retaguardia. En resumen, era una perversa. En la cama, por ejemplo, era cosa fina y volvíamos y nos daba gusto de lo lindo. Era una puta de tres pares de cojones. Por lo demás, es lo que hace falta para gozar bien. En esa cocina, la del asunto, la picardía es, al fin y al cabo, como la pimienta en una buena salsa, es indispensable y le da consistencia.

Los edificios del instituto daban a una amplia terraza, dorada en verano, entre los árboles, desde la que había una vista magnífica de París, como una perspectiva gloriosa. Allí nos esperaban, los jueves, nuestros visitantes y Lola entre ellos, que venía a traerme, puntual, pasteles, consejos y cigarrillos.

A nuestros médicos los veíamos todas las mañanas. Nos interrogaban con amabilidad, pero nunca sabíamos qué pensaban exactamente. Paseaban a nuestro alrededor, con semblantes siempre afables, nuestra condena a muerte.

Muchos de los enfermos que estaban allí en observación llegaban, más emotivos que los demás, en aquel ambiente dulzón, a un estado de exasperación tal, que se levantaban por la noche en lugar de dormir, recorrían el dormitorio a zancadas y de arriba abajo, protestaban a gritos contra su propia angustia, crispados entre la esperanza y la desesperación, como sobre una pared de montaña traidora. Pasaban días y días padeciendo así y después una noche se abandonaban al vacío e iban a confesar su caso con pelos y señales al médico jefe. A ésos no los volvíamos a ver, nunca. Yo tampoco estaba tranquilo. Pero, cuando eres débil, lo que da fuerza es despojar a los hombres que más temes del menor prestigio que aún estés dispuesto a atribuirles. Hay que aprender a considerarlos tales como son, peores de lo que son, es decir, desde cualquier punto de vista. Eso te despeja, te libera y te defiende más allá de lo imaginable. Eso te da otro yo. Vales por dos.

Sus acciones, en adelante, dejan de inspirarte ese asqueroso atractivo místico que te debilita y te hace perder tiempo y entonces su comedia ya no te resulta más agradable ni más útil en absoluto para tu progreso íntimo que la del cochino más vil.

Junto a mí, vecino de cama, dormía un cabo, también alistado voluntario. Profesor antes del mes de agosto en un instituto de Turena, donde, según me contó, enseñaba geografía e historia. Al cabo de algunos meses de guerra, había resultado ladrón, aquel profesor, como nadie. Resultaba imposible impedirle que robara al convoy de su regimiento conservas, en los furgones de la intendencia, en las reservas de la compañía y por todos los sitios donde encontrara.

Conque había ido a parar allí con nosotros, en espera del consejo de guerra. Sin embargo, como su familia hacía todo lo posible para probar que los obuses lo habían aturdido, desmoralizado, la instrucción difería el juicio de un mes para otro. No me hablaba demasiado. Pasaba horas peinándose la barba, pero, cuando me hablaba, era casi siempre de lo mismo: el medio que había descubierto para no hacer más hijos a su mujer. ¿Estaba loco de verdad? Cuando llega el momento del mundo al revés y preguntar por qué te asesinan es estar loco, resulta evidente que no hace falta gran cosa para que te tomen por loco. Hace falta que cuele, claro está, pero, cuando de lo que se trata es de evitar el gran descuartizamiento, algunos cerebros hacen esfuerzos de

imaginación magníficos.

Todo lo interesante ocurre en la sombra, no cabe duda. No se sabe nada de la historia auténtica de los hombres.

Princhard se llamaba, aquel profesor. ¿Qué podía haber decidido para salvar sus carótidas, sus pulmones y sus nervios ópticos? Ésa era la cuestión esencial, la que tendríamos que habernos planteado nosotros, los hombres, para seguir siendo estrictamente humanos y prácticos. Pero estábamos lejos de ese punto, titubeando en un ideal de absurdos, guardados por víctimas de las trivialidades marciales e insensatas; ratas ya ahumadas, intentábamos, enloquecidos, salir del barco en llamas, pero no teníamos ningún plan de conjunto, ninguna confianza mutua. Atontados por la guerra, nos habíamos vuelto locos de otra clase: el miedo. El derecho y el revés de la guerra.

Aun así, me mostraba, a través de aquel delirio común, cierta simpatía, aquel Princhard, aun desconfiando de mí, por supuesto.

Allí donde nos encontrábamos, la galera en que remábamos todos, no podía existir ni amistad ni confianza. Cada cual daba a entender sólo lo que le parecía favorable para su pellejo, puesto que todo o casi iba a ser repetido por los chivatos al acecho.

De vez en cuando, uno de nosotros desaparecía: quería decir que su caso había quedado zanjado, que terminaría o en consejo de guerra, en Biribi o en el frente y, para los que salían mejor librados, en el manicomio de Clamart.

No dejaban de llegar guerreros equívocos, de todas las armas, unos muy jóvenes y otros casi viejos, con canguelo o fanfarrones; sus mujeres y sus padres iban a visitarlos, sus chavales también, con ojos como platos, los jueves.

Todo el mundo lloraba con ganas, en el locutorio, hacia el atardecer sobre todo. La impotencia del mundo en la guerra venía a llorar allí, cuando las mujeres y los niños se iban, por el pasillo iluminado con macilenta luz de gas, acabadas las visitas, arrastrando los pies. Un gran rebaño de llorones formaban, y nada más, repugnantes.

Para Lola, venir a verme a aquella especie de prisión era otra aventura. Nosotros dos no llorábamos. No teníamos de dónde sacar lágrimas, nosotros.

«¿Es verdad que te has vuelto loco, Ferdinand?», me preguntó.

«¡Sí!», confesé.

«Entonces, ¿te van a curar aquí?»

«No se puede curar el miedo, Lola.»

«¿Tanto miedo tienes, entonces?»

«Tanto y más, Lola, tanto miedo, verdad, que, si muero de muerte natural, más adelante, ¡sobre todo no quiero que me incineren! Me gustaría que me dejaran en la tierra, pudriéndome en el cementerio, tranquilo, ahí, listo para revivir tal vez… ¡Nunca se sabe! Mientras que, si me incineraran, Lola, compréndelo, todo habría terminado, para siempre… Un esqueleto, pese a todo, se parece un poco a un hombre… Está siempre más listo para revivir que unas cenizas… Con las cenizas, ¡se acabó!… ¿Qué te parece?… Conque, la guerra, verdad…»

«¡Oh! Pero entonces ¡eres un cobarde de aupa, Ferdinand! Eres repugnante como una rata…»

«Sí, de lo más cobarde, Lola, rechazo la guerra por entero y todo lo que entraña… Yo no la deploro… Ni me resigno… Ni lloriqueo por ella… La rechazo de plano, con todos los hombres que encierra, no quiero tener nada que ver con ellos, con ella. Aunque sean noventa y cinco millones y yo sólo uno, ellos son los que se equivocan, Lola, y yo quien tiene razón, porque yo soy el único que sabe lo que quiere: no quiero morir nunca.»

«Pero, ¡no se puede rechazar la guerra, Ferdinand! Los únicos que rechazan la guerra son los locos y los cobardes, cuando su patria está en peligro…»

«Entonces, ¡que vivan los locos y los cobardes! O, mejor, ¡que sobrevivan! ¿Recuerdas, por ejemplo, un solo nombre, Lola, de uno de los soldados muertos durante la guerra de los Cien Años?… ¿Has intentado alguna vez conocer uno solo de esos nombres?… No, ¿verdad?… ¿Nunca lo has intentado? Te resultan tan anónimos, indiferentes y más desconocidos que el último átomo de este pisapapeles que tienes delante, que tu caca matinal… ¡Ya ves, pues, que murieron para nada, Lola! ¡Absolutamente para nada, aquellos cretinos! ¡Te lo aseguro! ¡Está demostrado! Lo único que cuenta es la vida. Te apuesto lo que quieras a que dentro de diez mil años esta guerra, por importante que nos parezca ahora, estará por completo olvidada… Una docena apenas de eruditos se pelearán aún, por aquí y por allá, en relación con ella y con las fechas de las principales hecatombes que la ilustraron… Es lo único memorable que los hombres han conseguido encontrar unos en relación con los otros a siglos, años e incluso horas de distancia… No creo en el porvenir, Lola…»

Cuando descubrió hasta qué punto fanfarroneaba de mi vergonzoso estado, dejé de parecerle digno de la menor lástima… Despreciable me consideró, definitivamente.

Decidió dejarme en el acto. Aquello pasaba de castaño obscuro. Cuando la acompañé hasta la puerta de nuestro hospicio aquella noche, no me besó.

Estaba claro, le resultaba imposible reconocer que un condenado a muerte no hubiera recibido al mismo tiempo vocación para ello. Cuando le pregunté por nuestros buñuelos, tampoco me respondió.

Al volver a la habitación, encontré a Princhard ante la ventana probándose gafas contra la luz del gas en

medio de un círculo de soldados. Era una idea que se le había ocurrido, según nos explicó, a la orilla del mar, en vacaciones, y, como entonces era verano, tenía intención de llevarlas por el día, en el parque. Era inmenso, aquel parque, y estaba muy vigilado, por cierto, por escuadrones de enfermeros alerta. Conque el día siguiente Princhard insistió para que lo acompañara hasta la terraza a probar las bonitas gafas. La tarde rutilaba espléndida sobre Princhard, defendido por sus cristales opacos; observé que tenía casi transparentes las ventanas de la nariz y que respiraba con precipitación.

«Amigo mío -me confió-, el tiempo pasa y no trabaja a mi favor… Mi conciencia es inaccesible a los remordimientos, estoy libre, ¡gracias a Dios!, de esas timideces… No son los crímenes los que cuentan en este mundo… Hace tiempo que se ha renunciado a eso… Son las meteduras de pata… Y yo creo haber cometido una… Del todo irremediable…»

«¿Al robar las conservas?»

«Sí, me creí astuto al hacerlo, ¡imagínese! Para substraerme a la contienda y de ese modo, cubierto de vergüenza, pero vivo aún, volver a la paz como se vuelve, extenuado, a la superficie del mar, tras una larga zambullida… Estuve a punto de lograrlo… Pero la guerra dura demasiado, la verdad… A medida que se alarga, ningún individuo parece lo bastante repulsivo para repugnar a la Patria… Se ha puesto a aceptar todos los sacrificios, la Patria, vengan de donde vengan, todas las carnes… ¡Se ha vuelto infinitamente indulgente a la hora de elegir a sus mártires, la Patria! En la actualidad ya no hay soldados indignos de llevar las armas y sobre todo de morir bajo las armas y por las armas… ¡Van a hacerme un héroe! Esa es la última noticia… La locura de las matanzas ha de ser extraordinariamente imperiosa, ¡para que se pongan a perdonar el robo de una lata de conservas! ¿Qué digo, perdonar? ¡Olvidar! Desde luego, tenemos la costumbre de admirar todos los días a bandidos colosales, cuya opulencia venera con nosotros el mundo entero, pese a que su existencia resulta ser, si se la examina con un poco más de detalle, un largo crimen renovado todos los días, pero esa gente goza de gloria, honores y poder, sus crímenes están consagrados por las leyes, mientras que, por lejos que nos remontemos en la Historia -y ya sabe que a mí me pagan para conocerla-, todo nos demuestra que un hurto venial, y sobre todo de alimentos mezquinos, tales como mendrugos, jamón o queso, granjea sin falta a su autor el oprobio explícito, los rechazos categóricos de la comunidad, los castigos mayores, el deshonor automático y la vergüenza inexpiable, y eso por dos razones: en primer lugar porque el autor de esos delitos es, por lo general, un pobre y ese estado entraña en sí una indignidad capital y, en segundo lugar, porque el acto significa una especie de rechazo tácito hacia la comunidad. El robo del pobre se convierte en un malicioso desquite individual, ¿me comprende?… ¿Adonde iríamos a parar? Por eso, la represión de los hurtos de poca importancia se ejerce, fíjese bien, en todos los climas, con un rigor extremo, no sólo como medio de defensa social, sino también, y sobre todo, como recomendación severa a todos los desgraciados para que se mantengan en su sitio y en su casta, tranquilos, contentos y resignados a diñarla por los siglos de los siglos de miseria y de hambre… Sin embargo, hasta ahora los rateros conservaban una ventaja en la República, la de verse privados del honor de llevar las armas patrióticas. Pero, a partir de mañana, esta situación va a cambiar, a partir de mañana yo, un ladrón, voy a ir a ocupar de nuevo mi lugar en el ejército… Ésas son las órdenes… En las altas esferas han decidido hacer borrón y cuenta nueva a propósito de lo que ellos llaman mi "momento de extravío" y eso, fíjese bien, por consideración a lo que también llaman "el honor de mi familia". ¡Qué mansedumbre! Dígame, compañero: ¿va a ser, entonces, mi familia la que sirva de colador y criba para las balas francesas y alemanas mezcladas?… Voy a ser yo y sólo yo, ¿no? Y cuando haya muerto, ¿será el honor de mi familia el que me haga resucitar?… Hombre, mire, me la imagino desde aquí, mi familia, pasada la guerra… Como todo pasa… Me imagino a mi familia brincando, gozosa, sobre el césped del nuevo verano, los domingos radiantes… Mientras debajo, a tres pies, el papá, yo, comido por los gusanos y mucho más infecto que un kilo de zurullos del 14 de julio, se pudrirá de lo lindo con toda su carne decepcionada… ¡Abonar los surcos del labrador anónimo es el porvenir verdadero del soldado auténtico! ¡Ah, compañero! ¡Este mundo, se lo aseguro, no es sino una inmensa empresa para cachondearse del mundo! Usted es joven. ¡Que estos minutos de sagacidad le valgan por años! Escúcheme bien, compañero, y no deje pasar nunca más, sin calar en su importancia, ese signo capital con que resplandecen todas las hipocresías criminales de nuestra sociedad: "el enternecimiento ante la suerte, ante la condición del miserable…" Os lo aseguro, buenas y pobres gentes, gilipollas, infelices, baqueteados por la vida, desollados, siempre empapados en sudor, os aviso, cuando a los grandes de este mundo les da por amaros, es que van a convertiros en carne de cañón… Es la señal… Infalible. Por el afecto empiezan. Luis XIV, conviene recordarlo, al menos se cachondeaba a rabiar del buen pueblo. Luis XV, igual. Se la chupaba por tiempos, el pueblo. No se vivía bien en aquella época, desde luego, los pobres nunca han vivido bien, pero no los destripaban con la terquedad y el ensañamiento que vemos en nuestros tiranos de hoy. No hay otro descanso, se lo aseguro, para los humildes que el desprecio de los grandes encumbrados, que sólo pueden pensar en el pueblo por interés o por sadismo… Los filósofos, ésos fueron, fíjese bien, ya que estamos, quienes comenzaron a contar historias al buen pueblo… ¡Él, que sólo conocía el catecismo! Se pusieron, según proclamaron, a educarlo… ¡Ah, tenían muchas verdades que revelarle! ¡Y hermosas! ¡Y no trilladas! ¡Luminosas! ¡Deslumbrantes! "¡Eso es!", empezó a decir, el buen pueblo, "¡sí, señor! ¡Exacto! ¡Muramos todos por eso!" ¡Lo único que pide siempre, el pueblo, es morir! Así es. "¡Viva Diderot!", gritaron y después "¡Bravo, Voltaire!" ¡Eso sí que son filósofos! ¡Y viva también Carnot, que organizaba tan bien las victorias! ¡Y viva todo el mundo! ¡Al menos, ésos son tíos que no le dejan palmar en la ignorancia y el fetichismo, al buen pueblo! ¡Le muestran los caminos de la libertad! ¡Lo emancipan! ¡Sin pérdida de tiempo!

En primer lugar, ¡que todo el mundo sepa leer los periódicos! ¡Es la salvación! ¡Qué hostia! ¡Y rápido! ¡No más analfabetos! ¡Hace falta algo más! ¡Simples soldados-ciudadanos! ¡Que voten! ¡Que lean! ¡Y que peleen! ¡Y que desfilen! ¡Y que envíen besos! Con tal régimen, no tardó en estar bien maduro, el pueblo. Entonces, ¡el entusiasmo por verse liberado tiene que servir, verdad, para algo! Danton no era elocuente porque sí. Con unos pocos berridos, tan altos, que aún los oímos, ¡inmovilizó en un periquete al buen pueblo! ¡Y ésa fue la primera salida de los primeros batallones emancipados y frenéticos! ¡Los primeros gilipollas votantes y banderólicos que el Dumoriez llevó a acabar acribillados en Flandes! El, a su vez, Dumoriez, que había llegado demasiado tarde a ese juego idealista, por entero inédito, como, en resumidas cuentas, prefería la pasta, desertó. Fue nuestro último mercenario… El soldado gratuito, eso era algo nuevo… Tan nuevo, que Goethe, con todo lo Goethe que era, al llegar a Valmy, se quedó deslumbrado. Ante aquellas cohortes andrajosas y apasionadas que acudían a hacerse destripar espontáneamente por el rey de Prusia para la defensa de la inédita ficción patriótica, Goethe tuvo la sensación de que aún le quedaban muchas cosas por aprender. "¡Desde hoy -clamó, magnífico, según las costumbres de su genio-, comienza una época nueva!" ¡Menudo! A continuación, como el sistema era excelente, se pusieron a fabricar héroes en serie y que cada vez costaban menos caros, gracias al perfeccionamiento del sistema. Todo el mundo lo aprovechó. Bismarck, los dos Napoleones, Barres, lo mismo que la amazona Elsa. La religión banderólica no tardó en substituir la celeste, nube vieja y ya desinflada por la Reforma y condensada desde hacía mucho tiempo en alcancías episcopales. Antiguamente, la moda fanática era: "¡Viva Jesús! ¡A la hoguera con los herejes!", pero, al fin y al cabo, los herejes eran escasos y voluntarios… Mientras que, en lo sucesivo, al punto en que hemos llegado, los gritos: "¡Al paredón los salsifíes sin hebra! ¡Los limones sin jugo! ¡Los lectores inocentes! Por millones, ¡vista a la derecha!" provocan las vocaciones de hordas inmensas. A los hombres que no quieren ni destripar ni asesinar a nadie, a los asquerosos pacíficos, ¡que los cojan y los descuarticen! ¡Y los liquiden de trece modos distintos y perfectos! ¡Que les arranquen, para que aprendan a vivir, las tripas del cuerpo, primero, los ojos de las órbitas y los años de su cochina vida babosa! Que los hagan reventar, por legiones y más legiones, figurar en cantares de ciego, sangrar, corroerse entre ácidos, ¡y todo para que la Patria sea más amada, más feliz y más dulce! Y si hay tipos inmundos que se niegan a comprender esas cosas sublimes, que vayan a enterrarse en seguida con los demás, pero no del todo, sino en el extremo más alejado del cementerio, bajo el epitafio infamante de los cobardes sin ideal, pues esos innobles habrán perdido el magnífico derecho a un poquito de sombra del monumento adjudicatorio y comunal elevado a los muertos convenientes en la alameda del centro y también habrán perdido el derecho a recoger un poco del eco del ministro, que vendrá también este domingo a orinar en casa del prefecto y lloriquear ante las tumbas después de comer…»

Pero desde el fondo del jardín llamaron a Princhard. El médico jefe lo llamaba con urgencia por mediación de su enfermero de servicio.

«Voy», respondió Princhard y tuvo el tiempo justo para pasarme el borrador del discurso que acababa de ensayar conmigo. Un truco de comediante.

No volví a verlo, a Princhard. Tenía el vicio de los intelectuales, era fútil. Sabía demasiadas cosas, aquel muchacho, y esas cosas lo trastornaban. Necesitaba la tira de trucos para excitarse, para decidirse.

Ha llovido mucho desde la tarde en que se marchó, ahora que lo pienso. No obstante, me acuerdo bien. Aquellas casas del arrabal que lindaban con nuestro parque se destacaban una vez más, bien claras, como todas las cosas, antes de que caiga la noche. Los árboles crecían en la sombra y subían a reunirse con la noche en el cielo.

Nunca hice nada por tener noticias suyas, por saber si había «desaparecido» de verdad, aquel Princhard, como dijeron una y otra vez. Pero es mejor que desapareciera.

Ya nuestra arisca paz lanzaba sus semillas hasta en la guerra.

Se podía adivinar lo que iba a ser, aquella histérica, con solo verla agitarse ya en la taberna del Olympia. Abajo, en el largo baile del sótano centelleante con cien espejos, pataleaba en el polvo y la gran desesperación al ritmo de música negro-judeo-sajona. Británicos y negros mezclados. Levantinos y rusos te encontrabas por todos lados, fumando, berreando, melancólicos y militares, en sofás carmesíes. Aquellos uniformes, que empezamos a olvidar con esfuerzo, fueron las simientes del hoy, esa cosa que aún crece y que no llegará a convertirse en estiércol hasta más adelante, a la larga.

Bien entrenados en el deseo gracias a las horas pasadas por semana en el Olympia, íbamos en grupo a visitar después a nuestra costurera-guantera-librera, la señora Herote, en el Passage des Beresinas, detrás del Folies-Bergére, hoy desaparecido, donde los perritos, llevados de la cadena por sus amitas, iban a hacer sus necesidades.

Allí íbamos a buscar a tientas nuestra felicidad, que el mundo entero amenazaba, rabioso. Nos daba vergüenza aquel deseo, pero, ¡no podíamos dejar de satisfacerlo! Es más difícil renunciar al amor que a la vida. Pasa uno la vida matando o adorando, en este mundo, y al mismo tiempo. «¡Te odio! ¡Te adoro!» Nos defendemos, nos mantenemos, volvemos a pasar la vida al bípedo del siglo próximo, con frenesí, a toda costa, como si fuera de lo más agradable continuarse, como si fuese a volvernos, a fin de cuentas, eternos. Deseo de abrazarse, pese a todo, igual que de rascarse.

Yo mejoraba mentalmente, pero mi situación militar seguía bastante indecisa. Me permitían salir a la ciudad de vez en cuando. Como digo, nuestra lencera se llamaba señora Herote. Tenía una frente tan estrecha, que al principio te encontrabas incómodo delante de ella, pero, en cambio, sus labios eran tan sonrientes y

carnosos, que después no sabías qué hacer para evitarla. Al abrigo de la volubilidad formidable, de un temperamento inolvidable, albergaba una serie de intenciones simples, rapaces, piadosamente comerciales.

Empezó a hacer fortuna en pocos meses, gracias a los aliados y a su vientre, sobre todo. Le habían quitado los ovarios, conviene señalarlo, operada de salpingitis el año anterior. Esa castración liberadora fue su fortuna. Hay blenorragias femeninas que resultan providenciales. Una mujer que pasa el tiempo temiendo los embarazos no es sino una especie de impotente y nunca irá lejos por el camino del éxito.

Los viejos y los jóvenes creen también, y yo lo creía, que en la trastienda de ciertas librerías-lencerías se encontraba el medio de hacer el amor con facilidad y barato. Aún era así, hace unos veinte años, pero desde entonces muchas cosas han dejado de hacerse, sobre todo algunas de las más agradables. El puritanismo anglosajón cada mes nos consume más, ya ha reducido casi a nada el cachondeo improvisado de las trastiendas. Todo se vuelve matrimonio y corrección.

La señora Herote supo aprovechar las últimas licencias que aún existían para joder de pie y barato. Un tasador de subastas desocupado pasó por su tienda un domingo, entró y allí sigue. Chocho estaba un poco y siguió estándolo y se acabó. La felicidad de la pareja no provocó el menor comentario. A la sombra de los periódicos, que deliraban con las llamadas a los sacrificios últimos y patrióticos, la vida, estrictamente medida, rellena de previsión, continuaba y mucho más astuta, incluso, que nunca. Tales son la cara y la cruz, como la luz y la sombra, de la misma medalla.

El tasador de la señora Herote colocaba en Holanda fondos para sus amigos, los mejor informados, y para la señora Herote, a su vez, en cuanto se hicieron confidentes. Las corbatas, los sujetadores, las camisas que vendía, atraían a clientes y dientas y sobre todo los incitaban a volver a menudo.

Gran número de encuentros extranjeros y nacionales se celebraron a la sombra rosada de aquellos visillos y entre la charla incesante de la patrona, toda cuya persona substancial, charlatana y perfumada hasta el desmayo, habría podido poner cachondo al hepático más rancio. En aquellas combinaciones, en lugar de perder la cabeza, la señora Herote sacaba provecho, en dinero en primer lugar, porque descontaba el diezmo sobre las ventas en sentimientos y, además, porque se hacía mucho amor en torno a ella. Uniendo y desuniendo a las parejas con un gozo al menos igual, a fuerza de chismes, insinuaciones, traiciones.

Imaginaba dichas y dramas sin cesar. Alimentaba la vida de las pasiones. Lo que no hacía sino beneficiar a su comercio.

Proust, espectro a medias él mismo, se perdió con tenacidad extraordinaria en la futilidad infinita y diluyente de los ritos y las actitudes que se enmarañan en torno a la gente mundana, gente del vacío, fantasmas de deseos, orgiastas indecisos que siempre esperan a su Watteau, buscadores sin entusiasmo de Cíteras improbables. Pero la señora Herote, de origen popular y substancial, se mantenía sólidamente unida a la tierra por rudos apetitos, animales y precisos.

Si la gente es tan mala, tal vez sea sólo porque sufre, pero pasa mucho tiempo entre el momento en que han dejado de sufrir y aquel en que se vuelven un poco mejores. El gran éxito material y pasional de la señora Herote no había tenido tiempo aún de suavizar su disposición para la conquista.

No era más rencorosa que la mayoría de las pequeñas comerciantes de por allí, pero hacía muchos esfuerzos para demostrarte lo contrario, por lo que se recuerda su caso. Su tienda no era sólo un lugar de citas, era también como una entrada furtiva en un mundo de riqueza y lujo, en el que yo, pese a mis deseos, nunca había penetrado hasta entonces y del que, por lo demás, quedé eliminado de modo rápido y penoso después de una incursión furtiva, la primera y la única.

Los ricos de París viven juntos; sus barrios, en bloque, forman un pedazo del pastel urbano, cuya punta va a tocar el Louvre, mientras que el reborde redondeado se detiene en los árboles entre el puente d'Auteuil y la puerta de Ternes. Ya veis. Es el pedazo mejor de la ciudad. Todo el resto no es sino esfuerzo y estiércol.

Cuando se pasa por el barrio de los ricos, al principio no se notan grandes diferencias con los demás, salvo que en él las calles están un poco más limpias y se acabó. Para ir a hacer una excursión hasta el interior mismo de esa gente, de esas cosas, hay que confiar en el azar o en la intimidad.

Por la tienda de la señora Herote se podía penetrar un poco antes en esa reserva gracias a los argentinos que bajaban de los barrios privilegiados para proveerse en su tienda de calzoncillos y camisas y echar caliches también a su hermoso surtido de amigas ambiciosas, teatrales y musicales, bien hechas, que la señora Herote atraía a propósito.

A una de ellas, yo, que no tenía otra cosa que ofrecer que mi juventud, como se suele decir, empecé a apreciarla más de la cuenta. La pequeña Musyne la llamaban en aquel medio.

En el Passage des Beresinas, todo el mundo se conocía de tienda en tienda, como en un auténtico pueblecito, encajonado entre dos calles de París, es decir, que allí la gente se espiaba y se calumniaba humanamente hasta el delirio.

En el aspecto material, antes de la guerra, de lo que discutían, entre comerciantes, era de una vida de estrechez y ahorro desesperados. Entre otras pruebas de miseria, era pesadumbre crónica de aquellos tenderos verse forzados, en su penumbra, a recurrir al gas, llegadas las cuatro de la tarde, por los escaparates. Pero, en cambio, se creaba así, al margen, un ambiente propicio para las proposiciones delicadas.

Aun así, muchas tiendas estaban decayendo por culpa de la guerra, mientras que la de la señora Herote, a fuerza de jóvenes argentinos, oficiales con peculio y consejos del amigo tasador, adquiría un auge que todo el mundo, en los alrededores, comentaba, como es de imaginar, en términos abominables.

Conviene señalar, por ejemplo, que en aquella misma época, el célebre pastelero del número 112 perdió de pronto sus bellas clientas a consecuencia de la movilización. Las habituales degustadoras de guante largo, obligadas por la requisa masiva de caballos a acudir a pie, no volvieron más. No iban a volver nunca más. En cuanto a Sambanet, el encuadernador de música, no pudo resistir, de repente, el deseo que siempre había sentido de sodomizar a un soldado. Semejante audacia, inoportuna, de una noche le causó un daño irreparable ante ciertos patriotas, que, ni cortos ni perezosos, lo acusaron de espionaje. Tuvo que cerrar la tienda.

En cambio, la señorita Hermanee, en el número 26, cuya especialidad era hasta entonces el artículo de caucho, confesable o no, se habría forrado, gracias a las circunstancias, si no hubiera encontrado precisamente todas las dificultades del mundo para abastecerse de «preservativos», que recibía de Alemania.

En resumen, sólo la señora Herote, en el umbral de la nueva época de la lencería fina y democrática, entró sin problemas en la prosperidad.

Entre tiendas, se escribían muchas cartas anónimas y, además, sabrosas. A su vez, la señora Herote prefería, para distraerse, enviarlas a personajes importantes; hasta en eso manifestaba la profunda ambición que constituía el fondo mismo de su temperamento. Al Presidente del Consejo, por ejemplo, le enviaba, sólo para asegurarle que era un cornudo, y al mariscal Pétain, en inglés, con ayuda del diccionario, para hacerlo rabiar. ¿La carta anónima? ¡Ducha sobre plumas! La señora Herote recibía todos los días un paquetito con cartas de ésas, para ella, cartas sin firmar y que no olían bien, os lo aseguro. La dejaban pensativa, atónita, diez minutos más o menos, pero en seguida recuperaba su equilibrio, como fuera, con lo que fuese, pero siempre, y, además, con solidez, pues en su vida interior no había sitio alguno para la duda y menos aún para la verdad.

Entre sus dientas y protegidas, muchas jóvenes artistas le llegaban con más deudas que vestidos. A todas daba consejo la señora Herote y ellas lo aprovechaban, entre otras Musyne, que a mí me parecía la más mona de todas. Un auténtico angelito musical, un encanto de violinista, un encanto muy avispado, por cierto, según me demostró. Implacable en su deseo de llegar en la tierra, y no en el cielo, quedaba muy airosa, en el momento en que la conocí, en un numerito de lo más mono, muy parisino y olvidado, en el Varietés.

Aparecía con su violín a modo de prólogo improvisado, versificado, melodioso. Un género adorable y complicado.

Con el sentimiento que le profesaba, el tiempo se me volvió frenético y lo pasaba corriendo del hospital a la salida de su teatro. Por lo demás, casi nunca era yo el único que la esperaba. Militares del ejército de tierra se la disputaban a brazo partido, aviadores también y con mayor facilidad aún, pero la palma seductora se la llevaban sin duda los argentinos. El comercio de carne congelada de éstos alcanzaba, gracias a la pululación de nuevos contingentes, las proporciones de una fuerza de la naturaleza. La pequeña Musyne aprovechó aquella época mercantil. Hizo bien, los argentinos ya no existen.

Yo no comprendía. Era cornudo con todo y todo el mundo, con las mujeres, el dinero y las ideas. Cornudo, pero no contento. Aún hoy, me la encuentro, a Musyne, por azar, cada dos años o casi, igual que a la mayoría de las personas a las que ha conocido uno muy bien. Es el lapso necesario, dos años, para darse cuenta, de un solo vistazo, infalible entonces, como el instinto, de las fealdades con que un rostro, aun delicioso en su época, se ha cargado.

Te quedas como vacilando un instante ante él y después acabas aceptándolo, tal como se ha transformado, el rostro, con esa inarmonía en aumento, innoble, de toda la cara. No queda más remedio que asentir, a esa cuidadosa y lenta caricatura esculpida por dos años. Aceptar el tiempo, cuadro de nosotros. Entonces podemos decir que nos hemos reconocido del todo (como un billete extranjero, que a primera vista no nos atrevemos a aceptar), que no nos hemos equivocado de camino, que hemos seguido la ruta correcta, sin concertarnos, la ruta indefectible durante dos años más, la ruta de la podredumbre. Y se acabó.

Musyne, cuando me encontraba así, por casualidad, parecía, de tanto como la asustaba mi cabezón, querer huirme a toda costa, evitarme, apartarse, cualquier cosa. Sentía en mí el hedor de todo un pasado, pero a mí, que sé su edad, desde hace demasiados años, ya puede hacer lo que quiera, que no puede evitarme en modo alguno. Se queda ahí, violenta ante mi existencia, como ante un monstruo. Ella, tan delicada, se cree obligada a hacerme preguntas meningíticas, imbéciles, como las que haría una criada sorprendida con las manos en la masa. Las mujeres tienen naturaleza de criadas. Pero tal vez sólo imagine ella esa repulsión, más que sentirla; ése es el consuelo que me queda. Tal vez yo sólo le sugiera que soy inmundo. Tal vez sea yo un artista en ese género. Al fin y al cabo, ¿por qué no habría de haber tanto arte posible en la fealdad como en la belleza? Es un género que cultivar, nada más.

Por mucho tiempo creí que era tonta, la pequeña Musyne, pero sólo era una opinión de vanidoso rechazado. Es que, antes de la guerra, todos éramos mucho más ignorantes y fatuos que hoy. No sabíamos casi nada de las cosas del mundo en general, en fin, unos inconscientes… Los tipejos de mi estilo confundían con mayor facilidad que hoy la gimnasia con la magnesia. Por estar enamorado de Musyne, tan mona ella, pensaba que eso me iba a dotar de toda clase de facultades y, ante todo y sobre todo, del valor que me faltaba, ¡todo ello porque era tan bonita y tenía tan buen oído para la música! El amor es como el alcohol, cuanto más impotente y borracho estás, más fuerte y listo te crees y seguro de tus derechos.

La señora Herote, prima de muchos héroes muertos, ya sólo salía de su Passage con riguroso luto; además, raras veces iba a la ciudad, pues su tasador amigo se mostraba muy celoso. Nos reuníamos en el comedor de la trastienda, que, con la llegada de la prosperidad, adquirió visos de saloncito. Íbamos allí a conversar, a

distraernos, amistosa, decorosamente, bajo el gas. La pequeña Musyne, al piano, nos extasiaba con los clásicos, sólo los clásicos, por las conveniencias de aquellos tiempos dolorosos. Allí pasábamos tardes enteras, codo con codo, con el tasador en medio, acunando juntos nuestros secretos, temores y esperanzas.

La sirvienta de la señora Herote, recién contratada, estaba muy interesada en saber cuándo se decidirían los unos a casarse con los otros. En su pueblo no se concebía el amor libre. Todos aquellos argentinos, aquellos oficiales, aquellos clientes buscones le causaban una inquietud casi animal.

Musyne se veía cada vez más acaparada por los clientes sudamericanos. Así acabé conociendo a fondo todas las cocinas y sirvientas de aquellos señores, a fuerza de ir a esperar a mi amada en el *office*. Por cierto, que los ayudas de cámara de aquellos señores me tomaban por el chulo. Y después todo el mundo acabó tomándome por un chulo, incluida la propia Musyne, al mismo tiempo, me parece, que todos los asiduos de la tienda de la señora Herote. ¡Qué le iba yo a hacer! Por lo demás, tarde o temprano te tiene que ocurrir, que te clasifiquen.

Obtuve de la autoridad militar otra convalecencia de dos meses de duración y se habló incluso de declararme inútil. Musyne y yo decidimos alquilar juntos un piso en Billancourt. Era para darme esquinazo, en realidad, aquel subterfugio, porque aprovechaba que vivíamos lejos para volver cada vez más raras veces a casa. Siempre encontraba nuevos pretextos para quedarse en París.

Las noches de Billancourt eran agradables, animadas a veces por aquellas pueriles alarmas de aviones y zepelines, gracias a las cuales los ciudadanos podían sentir escalofríos justificativos. Mientras esperaba a mi amante, iba a pasearme, caída la noche, hasta el puente de Grenelle, donde la sombra sube del río hasta el tablero del metro, con su rosario de farolas, tendido en plena obscuridad, con su enorme mole de chatarra también, que se lanza con estruendo en pleno flanco de los grandes inmuebles del Quai de Passy.

Existen ciertos rincones así en las ciudades, de una fealdad tan estúpida, que casi siempre te encuentras solo en ellos.

Musyne acabó volviendo a nuestro hogar, por llamarlo de algún modo, sólo una vez a la semana. Acompañaba cada vez con mayor frecuencia a las cantantes a casa de los argentinos. Habría podido tocar y ganarse la vida en los cines, donde me habría resultado mucho más fácil ir a buscarla, pero los argentinos eran alegres y generosos, mientras que los cines eran tristes y pagaban poco. Esas preferencias son la vida misma.

Para colmo de mi desgracia, se creó el «Teatro en el frente». Al instante, Musyne hizo mil amistades militares en el Ministerio y cada vez con mayor frecuencia se marchaba a distraer en el frente a nuestros soldaditos y durante semanas enteras, además. Allí detallaba, para los ejércitos, la sonata y el adagio delante de la platea del Estado Mayor, bien colocada para verle las piernas. Por su parte, los chorchis, amajadados detrás de los jefes, sólo gozaban con los ecos melodiosos. Después Musyne pasaba, como es lógico, noches muy complicadas en los hoteles de la zona militar. Un día volvió muy alegre del frente, provista de un diploma de heroísmo, firmado por uno de nuestros grandes generales, nada menos. Ese diploma fue el punto de partida para su triunfo definitivo.

En la colonia argentina supo hacerse de pronto extraordinariamente popular. La festejaban. Se pirraban por mi Musyne, ¡violinista de guerra tan mona! Tan joven y de pelo rizado y, además, heroica. Aquellos argentinos tenían el estómago agradecido, profesaban hacia nuestros grandes *chefs* una admiración infinita y, cuando regresó mi Musyne, con su documento auténtico, su hermoso palmito, sus deditos ágiles y gloriosos, se pusieron a cortejarla a cuál más, a rifársela, por así decir. La poesía heroica se apodera sin resistencia de quienes no van a la guerra y aún más de aquellos a quienes está enriqueciendo de lo lindo. Es normal.

Ah, el heroísmo pícaro es como para caerse de culo, ¡os lo aseguro! Los armadores de Río ofrecían sus nombres y sus acciones a la nena que encarnaba para ellos, con tanta gracia y feminidad, el valor francés y guerrero. Musyne había sabido crearse, hay que reconocerlo, un pequeño repertorio muy mono de incidentes de guerra, que, como un sombrero atrevido, le sentaba de maravilla. Muchas veces me asombraba a mí mismo con su tacto y hube de reconocer, al oírla, que, en punto a embustes, yo a su lado era un simulador grosero. Ella tenía el don de situar sus ocurrencias en un pasado lejano y dramático, en el que todo se volvía y se conservaba precioso y penetrante. En punto a cuentos, nosotros, los combatientes, advertí de pronto, muchas veces conservábamos un carácter groseramente temporal y preciso. En cambio, mi amada se movía en la eternidad. Hay que creer a Claude Lorrain, cuando dice que los primeros planos de un cuadro siempre son repugnantes y que el arte exige situar el interés de la obra en la lejanía, en lo imperceptible, allí donde se refugia la mentira, ese sueño sorprendido in fraganti y único amor de los hombres. La mujer que sabe tener en cuenta nuestra miserable naturaleza se convierte con facilidad en nuestra amada, nuestra indispensable y suprema esperanza. Esperamos, a su lado, que nos conserve nuestra falsa razón de ser, pero entretanto puede ganarse la vida de sobra ejerciendo su función mágica. Musyne no dejaba de hacerlo, por instinto.

Sus argentinos vivían por el barrio de Ternes y, sobre todo, por los alrededores del Bois, en hotelitos particulares, bien cercados, brillantes, donde por aquellos meses de invierno reinaba un calor tan agradable, que al entrar en ellos, de la calle, los pensamientos se te volvían de repente optimistas, sin querer.

Desesperado y tembloroso, me había propuesto, para meter la pata hasta el final, ir lo más a menudo posible, ya lo he dicho, a esperar a mi compañera en el *office*. Me armaba de paciencia y esperaba, a veces hasta la mañana; tenía sueño, pero los celos me mantenían bien despierto y también el vino blanco, que las criadas me servían en abundancia. A sus señores argentinos yo los veía muy raras veces, oía sus canciones y su estruendoso español y el piano que no cesaba de sonar, pero tocado la mayoría de las veces por manos

distintas de las de Musyne. Entonces, ¿qué hacía, la muy puta, con las manos, mientras tanto?

Cuando volvíamos a encontrarnos por la mañana, ante la puerta, ella ponía mala cara. Yo era aún natural como un animal en aquella época, no quería perder a mi amada y se acabó, como un perro su hueso.

Perdemos la mayor parte de la juventud a fuerza de torpezas. Era evidente que me iba a abandonar, mi amada, del todo y pronto. Yo no había aprendido aún que existen dos humanidades muy diferentes, la de los ricos y la de los pobres. Necesité, como tantos otros, veinte años y la guerra, para aprender a mantenerme dentro de mi categoría, a preguntar el precio de las cosas antes de tocarlas y, sobre todo, antes de encariñarme con ellas.

Así, pues, mientras me calentaba en el *office* con mis compañeros de la servidumbre, no comprendía que por encima de mi cabeza danzaban los dioses argentinos; podrían haber sido alemanes, franceses, chinos, eso carecía de importancia, pero dioses ricos, eso era lo que había que entender. Ellos arriba con mi Musyne; yo abajo, sin nada. Musyne pensaba con seriedad en su futuro, conque prefería hacerlo con un dios. Yo también, desde luego, pensaba en mi futuro, pero como en un delirio, porque todo el tiempo sentía, con sordina, el temor a que me mataran en la guerra y también a morir de hambre en la paz. Estaba con sentencia de muerte en suspenso y enamorado. No era una simple pesadilla. No demasiado lejos de nosotros, a menos de cien kilómetros, millones de hombres, valientes, bien armados, bien instruidos, me esperaban para ajustarme las cuentas y franceses también que me esperaban para acabar con mi piel, si me negaba a dejar que los de enfrente la hicieran jirones sangrientos.

Para el pobre existen en este mundo dos grandes formas de palmarla, por la indiferencia absoluta de sus semejantes en tiempo de paz o por la pasión homicida de los mismos llegada la guerra. Si se acuerdan de ti, al instante piensan en tu tortura, los otros, y en nada más. ¡Sólo les interesas chorreando sangre, a esos cabrones! Princhard había tenido más razón que un santo al respecto. Ante la inminencia del matadero, ya no especulas demasiado con las cosas del porvenir, sólo piensas en amar durante los días que te quedan, ya que es el único medio de olvidar el cuerpo un poco, olvidar que pronto te van a desollar de arriba abajo.

Como Musyne me esquivaba, yo me consideraba un idealista, así llamamos a nuestros pobres instintos, envueltos en palabras rimbombantes. Mi permiso se estaba acabando. Los periódicos insistían, machacones, en la necesidad de llamar a filas a todos los combatientes posibles y, ante todo, a quienes no tenían padrinos, por supuesto. Oficialmente, no había que pensar sino en ganar la guerra.

Musyne deseaba con ganas también, como Lola, que yo volviera a escape al frente y me quedara en él y, como parecía tomármelo con calma, se decidió a precipitar las cosas, aun no siendo eso propio de su carácter.

Una noche en que, por excepción, volvíamos juntos a Billancourt, pasaron de repente los bomberos trompetistas y todos los vecinos de nuestra casa se precipitaron al sótano en honor de no sé qué zepelín.

Aquellos pánicos de poca monta, durante los cuales todo un barrio en pijama desaparecía cloqueando, tras la vela, en las profundidades para escapar a un peligro casi por entero imaginario, daban idea de la angustiosa futilidad de aquellos seres, tan pronto gallinas espantadas tan pronto corderos fatuos y dóciles. Semejantes incongruencias monstruosas son como para asquear para siempre jamás al más paciente y tenaz de los sociófilos.

Desde el primer toque de clarín Musyne olvidaba que en el «Teatro en el frente» le habían descubierto gran heroísmo. Insistía para que me precipitara con ella al fondo de los subterráneos del metro, en las alcantarillas, donde fuera, pero al abrigo y en las profundidades últimas y, sobre todo, ¡al instante! De verlos a todos bajar corriendo así, grandes y pequeños, los inquilinos, frívolos o majestuosos, de cuatro en cuatro, hacia el agujero salvador, hasta yo acabé armándome de indiferencia. Cobarde o valiente, no quiere decir gran cosa. Conejo aquí, héroe allá, es el mismo hombre, no piensa más aquí que allá. Todo lo que no sea ganar dinero supera su capacidad de comprensión clara e infinitamente. Todo cuanto es vida o muerte le supera. Ni siquiera con su propia muerte especula bien a derechas. Sólo comprende el dinero y el teatro.

Musyne lloriqueaba ante mi resistencia. Otros inquilinos nos instaban a acompañarlos; acabé dejándome convencer. En cuanto a la elección del sótano, se emitieron proposiciones diferentes. El sótano del carnicero acabó obteniendo la mayoría de las adhesiones; afirmaban que estaba situado a mayor profundidad que ningún otro del inmueble. Desde el umbral te llegaban bocanadas de un olor acre y bien conocido por mí, que al instante me resultó de todo punto insoportable.

«¿Vas a bajar ahí, Musyne, con la carne colgando de los ganchos?», le pregunté.

«¿Por qué no?», me respondió, muy extrañada.

«Pues, mira, yo -dije- hay cosas que no puedo olvidar y prefiero volver ahí arriba…»

«Entonces, ¿te vas?»

«¡Ven a buscarme cuando haya acabado todo!»

«Pero puede durar mucho…»

«Prefiero esperarte ahí arriba -le dije-. No me gusta la carne y esto pasará pronto.»

Durante la alarma, protegidos en sus reductos, los inquilinos intercambiaban cortesías atrevidas. Ciertas damas en bata, llegadas en el último momento, se apresuraban con elegancia y mesura hacia aquella bóveda olorosa, en la que el carnicero y la carnicera hacían los honores, al tiempo que se excusaban por el frío artificial, indispensable para la buena conservación de la mercancía.

Musyne desapareció con los demás. La esperé, arriba, en nuestra casa, una noche, todo un día, un año… No volvió nunca a reunirse conmigo.

Por mi parte, yo me volví, a partir de entonces, cada vez más difícil de contentar y ya sólo pensaba en dos cosas: salvar el pellejo y marcharme a América. Pero escapar de la guerra constituía ya una tarea inicial, que me dejó sin aliento durante meses y más meses.

«¡Cañones! ¡Hombres! ¡Municiones!», exigían, sin parecer cansarse nunca, los patriotas. Al parecer, no se podía dormir hasta arrancar del yugo germánico a la pobre Bélgica y a la pequeña e inocente Alsacia. Era una obsesión que impedía, según nos decían, a los mejores de nosotros respirar, comer, copular. De todos modos, no parecía que les impidiera hacer negocios, a los supervivientes. La moral estaba alta en la retaguardia, no se podía negar.

Tuvimos que reincorporarnos rápido a nuestros regimientos. Pero a mí, ya en el primer reconocimiento, me encontraron muy por debajo de la media aún y apto sólo para ser enviado a otro hospital, para casos de huesos y nervios. Una mañana salimos seis del cuartel, tres artilleros y tres dragones, heridos y enfermos, en busca de aquel lugar donde reparaban el valor perdido, los reflejos abolidos y los brazos rotos. Primero pasamos, como todos los heridos de la época, por el control, en Val-de-Gráce, ciudadela ventruda, noble y rodeada de árboles y que olía de lo lindo a ómnibus por los pasillos, olor hoy, y seguramente para siempre, desaparecido, mezcla de pies, jergones y quinqués. No duramos mucho en Val; apenas nos vieron, dos oficiales intendentes, casposos y agotados de cansancio, nos echaron una bronca, como Dios manda, y nos amenazaron con enviarnos a consejo de guerra y otros intendentes nos echaron a la calle. No tenían sitio para nosotros, según decían, al tiempo que nos indicaban un destino impreciso: un bastión, por los alrededores de la ciudad.

De tabernas a bastiones, entre copas de *pastis y* cafés con leche, salimos, pues, los seis al azar de las direcciones equivocadas, en busca de aquel nuevo abrigo que parecía especializado en la curación de héroes incapaces, de nuestro estilo.

Uno solo de los seis poseía un rudimento de propiedad, que conservaba entera, conviene señalarlo, en una cajita de metal de galletas Pernot, marca célebre entonces y de la que no he vuelto a oír hablar. Dentro escondía, nuestro compañero, cigarrillos y un cepillo de dientes; por cierto, que nos reíamos todos del cuidado, poco común entonces, que dedicaba a sus dientes y lo tratábamos, por ese refinamiento insólito, de «homosexual».

Por fin, tras muchas vacilaciones, llegamos, hacia medianoche, a los terraplenes hinchados de tinieblas de aquel bastión de Bicétre, el «43» se llamaba. Era el bueno.

Acababan de reformarlo para recibir a lisiados y carcamales. El jardín ni siquiera estaba acabado.

Cuando llegamos, el único habitante de la parte militar era la portera. Llovía con fuerza. Tuvo miedo de nosotros, la portera, al oírnos, pero la hicimos reír al ponerle la mano al instante en el lugar correcto. «¡Creía que eran alemanes!», dijo. «¡Están lejos!», le respondimos. «¿De qué estáis enfermos?», nos preguntó, preocupada. «De todo, pero, ¡de la pilila, no!», respondió un artillero. O sea, que no faltaba buen humor, la verdad, y, además, la portera lo apreciaba. En aquel mismo bastión vivieron con nosotros más adelante vejetes de la Asistencia Pública. Habían construido para ellos, con urgencia, nuevos edificios provistos de kilómetros de vidrieras; allí dentro los guardaban hasta el fin de las hostilidades, como insectos. En las colinas de los alrededores, una erupción de parcelas diminutas se disputaban montones de barro, que se escurría, mal contenido entre hileras de cabañas precarias. Al abrigo de éstas crecían, de vez en cuando, una lechuga y tres rábanos, que, sin que se supiera nunca por qué, babosas asqueadas cedían al propietario.

Nuestro hospital estaba limpio, así, al principio, durante varias semanas, que es como hay que apresurarse a ver cosas así, pues en este país carecemos del menor gusto para la conservación de las cosas, somos incluso unos verdaderos guarros. Conque nos acostamos, ya digo, en la que se nos antojó de aquellas camas metálicas y a la luz de la luna; eran tan nuevos aquellos locales, que aún no llegaba la electricidad.

Por la mañana temprano, vino a presentarse nuestro nuevo médico jefe, muy contento de vernos, al parecer, todo cordialidad por fuera. Tenía sus razones para estar contento, acababan de ascenderlo a general. Aquel hombre tenía, además, los ojos más bellos del mundo, aterciopelados y sobrenaturales, y los utilizaba lo suyo para encandilar a cuatro enfermeras encantadoras y solícitas, que lo colmaban de atenciones y aspavientos y no se perdían ripio de su médico jefe. Desde el primer contacto se informó sobre nuestra moral. Cogiendo, campechano, del hombro a uno de nosotros y sacudiéndolo, paternal, nos expuso, con voz reconfortante, las reglas y el camino más corto para ir airosos y lo más pronto posible a que nos partiesen la cara de nuevo.

Fuera cual fuese su procedencia, la verdad es que la gente no pensaba en otra cosa. Era como para creer que disfrutaban con ello. El nuevo vicio. «Francia, amigos míos, ha puesto la confianza en vosotros; es una mujer, Francia, ¡la más bella de las mujeres! – entonó-. ¡Cuenta con vuestro heroísmo, Francia! Víctima de la más cobarde, la más abominable agresión. ¡Tiene derecho a exigir de sus hijos que la venguen profundamente! ¡A recuperar la integridad de su territorio, aun a costa del mayor sacrificio! Nosotros aquí, en lo que nos concierne, vamos a cumplir con nuestro deber. Amigos míos, ¡cumplid con el vuestro! ¡Nuestra ciencia os pertenece! ¡Es vuestra! ¡Todos sus recursos están al servicio de vuestra curación! ¡Ayudadnos, a vuestra vez, en la medida de vuestra buena voluntad! ¡Ya sé que podemos contar con ella! ¡Y que podáis pronto reintegraros a vuestros puestos, junto a vuestros queridos compañeros de las trincheras! ¡Vuestros sagrados puestos! Para la defensa de nuestro querido suelo. ¡Viva Francia! ¡Adelante!» Sabía hablar a los soldados.

Estábamos, cada cual al pie de su cama, en posición de firmes, escuchándolo. Detrás de él, una morena del grupo de sus bonitas enfermeras dominaba mal la emoción que la embargaba y que algunas lágrimas

volvieron visible. Sus compañeras se mostraron al instante solícitas con ella: «Pero, ¡querida! ¡Si va a volver, mujer!… Te lo aseguro…»

La que mejor la consolaba era una de sus primas, la rubia un poco regordeta. Al pasar junto a nosotros, sosteniéndola en sus brazos, me confió, la regordeta, que estaba tan desconsolada, su prima tan mona, por la marcha reciente de su novio, incorporado a la Marina. El fogoso jefe, desconcertado, se esforzaba por atenuar la hermosa y trágica emoción propagada por su breve y vibrante alocución. Se encontraba muy confuso y apenado ante ella. Despertar de una inquietud demasiado dolorosa en un corazón excepcional, evidentemente patético, todo sensibilidad y ternura. «Si lo hubiéramos sabido, doctor -seguía susurrando la rubia prima-, le habríamos avisado… ¡Si usted supiera lo tiernamente que se aman!…» El grupo de las enfermeras y el propio doctor desaparecieron sin dejar de chacharear y susurrar por el corredor. Ya no se ocupaban de nosotros.

Intenté recordar y comprender el sentido de aquella alocución que acababa de pronunciar el hombre de ojos espléndidos, pero, a mí, lejos de entristecerme, me parecieron, tras reflexionar, extraordinariamente atinadas, aquellas palabras, para quitarme las ganas de morir. De la misma opinión eran los demás compañeros, pero éstos no veían en ellas, además, como yo, una actitud de desafío e insulto. Ellos no intentaban comprender lo que ocurría a nuestro alrededor en la vida, sólo discernían, y aun apenas, que el delirio ordinario del mundo había aumentado desde hacía unos meses, en tales proporciones, que, desde luego, ya no podía uno apoyar la existencia en nada estable.

Allí, en el hospital, como en la noche de Flandes, la muerte nos atormentaba; sólo, que aquí nos amenazaba desde más lejos, la muerte, irrevocable como allá, cierto es, una vez lanzada sobre nuestra trémula osamenta por la solicitud de la Administración.

Allí no nos abroncaban, desde luego, nos hablaban con dulzura incluso, nos hablaban todo el tiempo de cualquier cosa menos de la muerte, pero nuestra condena figuraba, no obstante, con toda claridad en el ángulo de cada papel que nos pedían firmar, en cada precaución que tomaban para con nosotros: medallas… brazaletes… el menor permiso… cualquier consejo… Nos sentíamos contados, acechados, numerados en la gran reserva de los que partirían mañana. Conque, lógicamente, todo aquel mundo ambiente, civil y sanitario, parecía más despreocupado que nosotros, en comparación. Las enfermeras, aquellas putas, no compartían nuestro destino, sólo pensaban, por el contrario, en vivir mucho tiempo, mucho más aún, y en amar, estaba claro, en pasearse y en hacer y volver a hacer el amor mil y diez mil veces. Cada una de aquellas angélicas se aferraba a su planecito en el perineo, como los forzados, para más adelante, su planecito de amor, cuando la hubiéramos diñado, nosotros, en un barrizal cualquiera, ¡y sólo Dios sabe cómo!

Lanzarían entonces suspiros rememorativos especiales que las volverían más atrayentes aún; evocarían en silencios emocionados los trágicos tiempos de la guerra, los fantasmas… «¿Os acordáis del joven Bardamu -dirían en la hora crepuscular, pensando en mí-, aquel que tanto trabajo nos daba para impedir que protestara?… Tenía la moral muy baja, aquel pobre muchacho… ¿Qué habrá sido de él?»

Algunas nostalgias poéticas en el momento oportuno favorecen a una mujer tan bien como los cabellos vaporosos a la luz de la luna.

Al amparo de cada una de sus palabras y de su solicitud, había que entender en adelante: «La vas a palmar, gentil soldado… La vas a palmar… Es la guerra… Cada cual con su vida… Con su papel… Con su muerte… Parece que compartimos tu angustia… Pero no se comparte la muerte de nadie… Todo debe ser, para las almas y los cuerpos sanos, motivo de distracción y nada más y nada menos y nosotras somos chicas fuertes, hermosas, consideradas, sanas y bien educadas… Para nosotras todo se vuelve, por automatismo biológico, espectáculo gozoso, ¡y se convierte en alegría! ¡Así lo exige nuestra salud! Y las feas licencias del pesar nos resultan imposibles… Necesitamos excitantes, sólo excitantes… Pronto quedaréis olvidados, soldaditos… Sed buenos y diñadla rápido… Y que acabe la guerra y podamos casarnos con uno de vuestros amables oficiales… ¡Sobre todo uno moreno!… ¡Viva la patria de la que siempre habla papá!… ¡Qué bueno debe de ser el amor, cuando vuelve de la guerra!… ¡Nuestro maridito será condecorado!… Será distinguido… Podrás sacar brillo a sus bonitas botas el hermoso día de nuestra boda, si aún existes, soldadito… ¿No te alegrarás entonces de nuestra felicidad, soldadito?…»

Todas las mañanas vimos y volvimos a ver a nuestro médico jefe, seguido de sus enfermeras. Era un sabio, según supimos. En torno a nuestras salas pasaban correteando los vejetes del asilo contiguo a saltos inútiles y descompasados. Iban a escupir sus chismes con sus caries de una sala a otra, llevando consigo maledicencias y cotilleos trasnochados. Encerrados allí, en su miseria oficial, como en un cercado baboso, los viejos trabajadores pastaban todo el excremento que se acumula en torno a las almas en los largos años de servidumbre. Odios impotentes, enmohecidos en la apestosa ociosidad de las salas comunes. Sólo utilizaban sus últimas y trémulas energías para hacerse un poco más de daño y destruir lo que les quedaba de placer y aliento.

¡Supremo placer! En su acartonada osamenta ya no subsistía un solo átomo que no fuera estrictamente malintencionado.

Desde que quedó claro que nosotros, los soldados, compartiríamos las relativas comodidades del bastión con aquellos vejetes, empezaron a detestarnos al unísono, sin por ello dejar de venir al tiempo a mendigar y sin descanso, haciendo cola por las ventanas, nuestras colillas y los mendrugos de pan duro caídos bajo los bancos. Sus apergaminados rostros se estrellaban a la hora de las comidas contra los vidrios de nuestro refectorio. Por entre los pliegues legañosos de sus narices lanzaban miradas de ratas viejas y codiciosas. Uno

de aquellos lisiados parecía más astuto y pillo que los demás, venía a cantarnos cancioncillas de su época para distraernos, el tío Birouette lo llamábamos. Estaba dispuesto a hacer todo lo que quisiéramos, con tal de que le diésemos tabaco, cualquier cosa menos pasar ante el depósito de cadáveres del hospital, que, por cierto, nunca estaba vacío. Una de las bromas consistía en llevarlo hacia allá, como de paseo. «¿No quieres entrar?», le preguntábamos, cuando estábamos justo delante de la puerta. Entonces salía pitando y gruñendo, pero tan rápido y tan lejos, que no volvíamos a verlo durante dos días por lo menos, al tío Birouette. Había vislumbrado la muerte.

Nuestro médico jefe, el de los ojos bellos, profesor Bestombes, para hacernos recobrar ánimos, había hecho instalar todo un equipo muy complicado de artefactos eléctricos centelleantes, cuyas descargas periódicas sufríamos, efluvios que, según decía, eran tonificantes y habíamos de aceptar so pena de expulsión. Era muy rico, al parecer, Bestombes. Había que serlo para comprar todos aquellos chismes costosos y electrocutores. Su suegro, político importante, que había hecho grandes trapicheos con compras gubernamentales de terrenos, le permitía esas larguezas.

Había que aprovechar. Todo se arregla. Crímenes y castigos. Tal como era, no lo detestábamos. Examinaba nuestro sistema nervioso con un cuidado extraordinario y nos interrogaba con tono de familiaridad cortés. Esa campechanía calculada divertía deliciosamente a las enfermeras, todas distinguidas, de su servicio. Todas las mañanas esperaban, aquellas monadas, el momento de regocijarse con las manifestaciones de su gran gentileza; se relamían. En resumen, actuábamos todos en una obra en que él, Bestombes, había elegido el papel de sabio benefactor y profunda, amablemente humano; el caso era entenderse.

En aquel nuevo hospital, yo compartía habitación con el sargento Branledore, reenganchado; era un antiguo huésped de los hospitales, Branledore. Hacía meses que arrastraba su intestino perforado por cuatro servicios diferentes.

Durante esas estancias había aprendido a atraer y después conservar la simpatía activa de las enfermeras. Vomitaba, orinaba y evacuaba sangre bastante a menudo, Branledore; también tenía mucha dificultad para respirar, pero eso no habría bastado del todo para granjearle la buena disposición del personal, que veía cosas peores. Conque, entre dos ahogos, si pasaba por allí un médico o una enfermera: «¡Victoria! ¡Victoria! ¡Conseguiremos la Victoria!», gritaba Branledore a pleno pulmón o lo murmuraba por lo bajinis, según los casos. Adaptado así a la ardiente literatura agresiva mediante un oportuno efecto teatral, gozaba de la consideración moral más elevada. Se sabía el truco, el tío.

Como todo era teatro, había que actuar y tenía toda la razón Branledore; nada parece más idiota ni irrita tanto, la verdad, como un espectador inerte que haya subido por azar a las tablas. Cuando se está ahí arriba, verdad, hay que adoptar el tono, animarse, actuar, decidirse o desaparecer. Sobre todo las mujeres pedían espectáculo y eran despiadadas, las muy putas, para con los aficionados desconcertados. La guerra, no cabe duda, afecta a los ovarios; exigían héroes y quienes no lo eran del todo debían presentarse como tales o bien prepararse para sufrir el más ignominioso de los destinos.

Tras haber pasado ocho días en aquel nuevo servicio, habíamos comprendido la necesidad urgente de cambiar de actitud y, gracias a Branledore (representante de encajes en la vida civil), aquellos mismos hombres atemorizados y que buscaban la sombra, presa de vergonzosos recuerdos de mataderos, que éramos al llegar, se convirtieron en una pandilla de pájaros de aúpa, todos resueltos a la victoria y, os lo garantizo, armados de arranque y declaraciones imponentes. En efecto, nuestro lenguaje se había vuelto recio y tan subido de tono, que hacía enrojecer a veces a aquellas damas, si bien nunca se quejaban, porque es sabido que un soldado es tan bravo como despreocupado y más grosero de lo debido y que cuanto más bravo más grosero es.

Al principio, al tiempo que imitábamos a Branledore lo mejor que podíamos, nuestras actitudes patrióticas no quedaban del todo bien, no eran muy convincentes. Necesitamos una buena semana e incluso dos de ensayos intensivos para adoptar del todo el tono, el bueno.

En cuanto nuestro médico, el profesor agregado Bestombes notó, sabio él, la brillante mejora de nuestras cualidades morales, decidió, para estimularnos, autorizarnos algunas visitas, empezando por las de nuestros padres.

Algunos soldados capaces, por lo que yo había oído contar, experimentaban, al mezclarse en los combates, como embriaguez e incluso viva voluptuosidad. Por mi parte, en cuanto intentaba imaginar una voluptuosidad de ese orden tan especial, me ponía enfermo durante ocho días al menos. Me sentía tan incapaz de matar a alguien, que, desde luego, más valía renunciar y acabar de una vez. No es que hubiera carecido de experiencia, habían hecho todo lo posible incluso para hacerme cogerle gusto, pero no tenía ese don. Tal vez habría necesitado una iniciación más lenta.

Un día decidí comunicar al profesor Bestombes las dificultades que encontraba en cuerpo y alma para ser tan bravo como me habría gustado y como las circunstancias, sublimes, desde luego, lo exigían. Temía que me considerara un descarado, un charlatán impertinente… Pero, ¡qué va! ¡Al contrario! El profesor se declaró muy contento de que, en aquel arranque de franqueza, acudiera a confiarle la confusión espiritual que sentía.

«Amigo Bardamu, ¡está usted mejorando! ¡Está usted mejorando, sencillamente!» Ésa era su conclusión. «Esta confidencia que acaba de hacerme, de forma absolutamente espontánea, la considero, Bardamu, indicio muy alentador de una mejoría notable en su estado mental… Por lo demás, Vaudesquin, observador modesto, pero tan sagaz, de los desfallecimientos morales entre los soldados del Imperio, resumió, ya en 1802,

observaciones de ese género en una memoria, hoy clásica, si bien injustamente despreciada por nuestros estudiosos actuales, en la que notaba, como digo, con mucha exactitud y precisión, crisis llamadas "de confesión", que sobrevienen, señal excelente, al convaleciente moral… Nuestro gran Dupré, casi un siglo después, supo establecer a propósito del mismo síntoma su nomenclatura, ahora célebre, en la que esta crisis idéntica figura con el título de crisis de "acopio de recuerdos", crisis que, según el mismo autor, debe producirse, cuando la cura va bien encauzada, poco antes de la derrota total de las ideaciones angustiosas y de la liberación definitiva de la esfera de la conciencia, fenómeno secundario, en resumen, en el curso del restablecimiento psíquico. Por otra parte, Dupré, con su terminología tan caracterizada por las imágenes y cuyo secreto sólo él conocía, llama "diarrea cogitativa de liberación" a esa crisis que en el sujeto va acompañada de una sensación de euforia muy activa, de una recuperación muy marcada de la actividad de comunicación, recuperación, entre otras, muy notable del sueño, que vemos prolongarse de repente durante días enteros; por último, otra fase: superactividad muy marcada de las funciones genitales, hasta el punto de que no es raro observar en los mismos enfermos, antes frígidos, auténticas "carpantas eróticas". A eso se debe esta fórmula: "El enfermo no entra en la curación: ¡se precipita!" Tal es el término magníficamente descriptivo, verdad, de esos triunfos en la recuperación, mediante el cual otro de nuestros grandes psiquiatras franceses del siglo pasado, Philibert Margeton, caracterizaba la recuperación de verdad triunfal de todas las actividades normales en un sujeto convaleciente de la enfermedad del miedo… En lo referente a usted, Bardamu, lo considero, pues, desde ahora, un auténtico convaleciente… ¿Le interesaría saber, Bardamu, ya que hemos llegado a esta conclusión satisfactoria, que mañana, precisamente, presento en la Sociedad de Psicología Militar una memoria sobre las cualidades fundamentales del espíritu humano?… Es una memoria de calidad, me parece.»

«Desde luego, profesor, esas cuestiones me apasionan…»

«Pues bien, sepa usted, en resumen, Bardamu, que en ella defiendo esta tesis: que antes de la guerra el hombre seguía siendo un desconocido inaccesible para el psiquiatra y los recursos de su espíritu un enigma…»

«Ésa es también mi muy modesta opinión, profesor…»

«Mire usted, Bardamu, la guerra, gracias a los medios incomparables que nos ofrece para poner a prueba los sistemas nerviosos, ¡hace de formidable revelador del espíritu humano! Vamos a poder pasar siglos ocupados en meditar sobre estas revelaciones patológicas recientes, siglos de estudios apasionados… Confesémoslo con franqueza… ¡Hasta ahora sólo habíamos sospechado las riquezas emotivas y espirituales del hombre! Pero en la actualidad, gracias a la guerra, es un hecho… ¡Estamos penetrando, a consecuencia de una fractura, dolorosa, desde luego, pero decisiva y providencial para la ciencia, en su intimidad! Desde las primeras revelaciones, a mí, Bestombes, ya no me cupo duda sobre el deber del psicólogo y del moralista modernos. ¡Era necesaria una reforma total de nuestras concepciones psicológicas!»

También yo, Bardamu, era de esa opinión.

«En efecto, creo, profesor, que estaría bien…»

«¡Ah! También lo cree usted, Bardamu, ¡no es que yo se lo diga! Mire usted, en el hombre lo bueno y lo malo se equilibran, egoísmo por una parte, altruismo por otra… En los sujetos excepcionales, más altruismo que egoísmo. ¿Eh? ¿No es así?»

«Así es, profesor, exactamente así…»

«Y en el sujeto excepcional, dígame, Bardamu, ¿cuál puede ser la más elevada entidad conocida que pueda estimular su altruismo y obligarlo a manifestarse indiscutiblemente?»

«¡El patriotismo, profesor!»

«¡Ah! Ve usted, ¡no es que yo se lo diga! ¡Me comprende usted perfectamente… Bardamu! ¡El patriotismo y su corolario, la gloria, simplemente, su prueba!»

«¡Es cierto!»

«¡Ah! Nuestros soldaditos, fíjese bien, y desde las primeras pruebas de fuego, han sabido liberarse espontáneamente de todos los sofismas y conceptos accesorios y, en particular, de los sofismas de la conservación. Han ido a fundirse por instinto y a la primera con nuestra auténtica razón de ser, nuestra Patria. Para llegar hasta esa verdad, no sólo la inteligencia es superflua, Bardamu, ¡es que, además, molesta! Es una verdad del corazón, la Patria, como todas las verdades esenciales, ¡en eso el pueblo no se equivoca! Justo en lo que el sabio malo se extravía…»

«¡Eso es hermoso, profesor! ¡Demasiado hermoso! ¡Es clásico!»

Me estrechó las dos manos casi con afecto, Bestombes.

Con voz que se había vuelto paternal, tuvo a bien añadir, además, a mi intención: «Así voy a tratar a mis enfermos, Bardamu, mediante la electricidad para el cuerpo y el espíritu, dosis masivas de ética patriótica, auténticas inyecciones de moral reconstituyente».

«¡Lo comprendo, profesor!»

En efecto, comprendía cada vez mejor.

Tras separarme de él, me dirigí sin tardanza a la misa con mis compañeros reconstituidos en la capilla recién construida y descubrí a Branledore, que manifestaba su elevada moral dando lecciones de entusiasmo precisamente a la nieta de la portera detrás del portalón. Ante su invitación, acudí al instante a reunirme con él.

Por la tarde, por primera vez desde que estábamos allí vinieron padres desde París y después todas las

semanas.

Por fin había escrito a mi madre. Estaba contenta de volver a verme, mi madre, y lloriqueaba como una perra a la que por fin hubieran devuelto su cachorro. Sin duda creía ayudarme mucho también al besarme, pero en realidad permanecía en un nivel inferior al de la perra, porque creía en las palabras que le decían para arrebatarme de su lado. Al menos la perra sólo cree en lo que huele. Mi madre y yo dimos un largo paseo por las calles cercanas al hospital, una tarde, fuimos vagabundeando por las calles sin acabar que hay por allí, calles con farolas aún sin pintar, entre las largas fachadas chorreantes, de ventanas abigarradas con cien trapos colgando, las camisas de los pobres, oyendo el chisporroteo de la chamusquina a mediodía, borrasca de grasas baratas. En el gran abandono lánguido que rodea la ciudad, allí donde la mentira de su lujo va a chorrear y acabar en podredumbre, la ciudad muestra a quien lo quiera ver su gran trasero de cubos de basura. Hay fábricas que eludes al pasear, que exhalan todos los olores, algunos casi increíbles, donde el aire de los alrededores se niega a apestar más. Muy cerca, enmohece la verbenita, entre dos altas chimeneas desiguales; sus caballitos pintados son demasiado caros para quienes los desean, muchas veces durante semanas enteras, mocosos raquíticos, atraídos, rechazados y retenidos a un tiempo, con todos los dedos en la nariz, por su abandono, la pobreza y la música.

Todo son esfuerzos para alejar de aquellos lugares la verdad, que no cesa de volver a llorar sobre todo el mundo; por mucho que se haga, por mucho que se beba, aunque sea vino tinto, espeso como la tinta, el cielo sigue siendo igual allí, cerrado, como una gran charca para los humos del suburbio.

En tierra, el barro se agarra al cansancio y los flancos de la existencia están cerrados también, bien cercados por inmuebles y más fábricas. Son ya féretros las paredes por ese lado. Como Lola se había ido para siempre y Musyne también, ya no me quedaba nadie. Por eso había acabado escribiendo a mi madre, por ver a alguien. A los veinte años ya sólo tenía pasado. Recorrimos juntos, mi madre y yo, calles y calles dominicales. Ella me contaba las insignificancias relativas a su comercio, lo que decían de la guerra a su alrededor, en la ciudad, que era triste, la guerra, «espantosa» incluso, pero que con mucho valor acabaríamos saliendo todos de ella, los caídos para ella no eran sino accidentes, como en las carreras; si se agarraran bien, no se caerían. Por lo que a ella respectaba, no veía en la guerra sino una gran pesadumbre nueva que intentaba no agitar demasiado; parecía que le diera miedo aquella pesadumbre; estaba repleta de cosas temibles que no comprendía. En el fondo, creía que los humildes como ella estaban hechos para sufrir por todo, que ésa era su misión en la Tierra, y que, si las cosas iban tan mal recientemente, debía de deberse también, en gran parte, a las muchas faltas acumuladas que habían cometido, los humildes… Debían de haber hecho tonterías, sin darse cuenta, por supuesto, pero el caso es que eran culpables y ya era mucha bondad que se les diera así, sufriendo, la ocasión de expiar sus indignidades… Era una «intocable», mi madre.

Ese optimismo resignado y trágico le servía de fe y constituía el fondo de su temperamento.

Seguíamos los dos, bajo la lluvia, por las calles sin edificar; por allí las aceras se hunden y desaparecen, los pequeños fresnos que las bordean conservan mucho tiempo las gotas en las ramas, en invierno, trémulas al viento, humilde hechizo. El camino del hospital pasaba por delante de numerosos hoteles recientes, algunos tenían nombre, otros ni siquiera se habían tomado esa molestia. «Habitaciones por semanas», decían, simplemente. La guerra los había vaciado, brutal, de su contenido de obreros y peones. No iban a volver ni siquiera para morir, los inquilinos. También es un trabajo morir, pero lo harían fuera.

Mi madre me acompañaba de nuevo hasta el hospital lloriqueando, aceptaba el accidente de la muerte; no sólo consentía, se preguntaba, además, si tenía yo tanta resignación como ella. Creía en la fatalidad tanto como en el bello metro de la Escuela de Artes y Oficios, del que siempre me había hablado con respeto, porque, siendo joven, le habían enseñado que el que utilizaba en su comercio de mercería era la copia escrupulosa de ese soberbio patrón oficial.

Entre las parcelas de aquel campo venido a menos existían aún algunos terrenos cultivados aquí y allá y, aferrados incluso a aquellos pobres restos, algunos campesinos viejos encajonados entre las casas nuevas. Cuando nos quedaba tiempo antes de regresar a la caída de la tarde, íbamos a contemplarlos, mi madre y yo, a aquellos extraños campesinos empeñados en excavar con un hierro esa cosa blanda y granulosa que es la tierra, donde meten a los muertos para que se pudran y de donde procede, de todos modos, el pan. «¡Debe de ser muy duro vivir de la tierra!», comentaba todas las veces al observarlos, mi madre, muy perpleja. En punto a miserias, sólo conocía las que se parecían a la suya, las de la ciudad, intentaba imaginarse cómo podían ser las del campo. Fue la única curiosidad que le conocí, a mi madre, y le bastaba como distracción para un domingo. Con eso volvía a la ciudad.

Yo no recibía la menor noticia de Lola, ni de Musyne tampoco. Las muy putas se mantenían claramente en el lado ventajoso de la situación, donde reinaba una consigna risueña pero implacable de eliminación para nosotros, carnes destinadas a los sacrificios. Ya en dos ocasiones me habían echado así hacia los lugares donde encierran a los rehenes. Simple cuestión de tiempo y de espera. La suerte estaba echada.

Branledore, mi vecino de hospital, el sargento, gozaba, ya lo he contado, de una persistente popularidad entre las enfermeras, estaba cubierto de vendas y radiante de optimismo. Todo el mundo en el hospital envidiaba y copiaba su actitud. Al volvernos presentables y dejar de ser repulsivos moralmente, empezamos, a nuestra vez, a recibir las visitas de gente bien situada en la sociedad y la administración parisinas. Se comentaba en los salones que el centro neurológico del profesor Bestombes estaba convirtiéndose en el auténtico foco, por así decir, del fervor patriótico intenso, el hogar. A partir de entonces los días de visita

recibimos no sólo a obispos, sino también a una duquesa italiana, un gran fabricante de municiones y pronto la propia Ópera y los actores del Théatre Franjáis. Venían a admirarnos sobre el terreno. Una bella actriz de la Comedie, que recitaba los versos como nadie, volvió incluso a mi cabecera para declamarme algunos particularmente heroicos. Su pelirroja y perversa melena (la piel hacía juego) se veía recorrida al tiempo por ondas sorprendentes que me llegaban en vibraciones derechas hasta el perineo. Como me interrogaba, aquella divina, sobre mis acciones de guerra, le di tantos detalles y tan emocionantes, que ya no me quitó los ojos de encima. Presa de emoción duradera, me pidió permiso para estampar en verso, gracias a un poeta admirador suyo, los pasajes más intensos de mis relatos. Accedí al instante. El profesor Bestombes, enterado de aquel proyecto, se declaró particularmente favorable. Incluso concedió una entrevista con ocasión de ello y el mismo día a los enviados de una gran *Revista ilustrada,* que nos fotografió a todos juntos en la escalinata del hospital junto a la bella actriz. «El más alto deber de los poetas, en los trágicos momentos que vivimos -declaró el profesor Bestombes, que no dejaba escapar ni una oportunidad-, ¡es el de devolvernos el gusto por la Epopeya! ¡Han pasado los tiempos de las maniobras mezquinas! ¡Abajo las literaturas acartonadas! ¡Un alma nueva nos ha nacido en medio del gran y noble estruendo de las batallas! ¡Lo exige en adelante el desarrollo de la gran renovación patriótica! ¡Las altas cimas prometidas a nuestra Gloria!… ¡Exigimos el soplo grandioso del poema épico!… Por mi parte, ¡declaro admirable que en este hospital que dirijo llegue a formarse, ante nuestros ojos, de modo inolvidable, una de esas sublimes colaboraciones creadoras entre el Poeta y uno de nuestros héroes!»

Branledore, mi compañero de cuarto, cuya imaginación llevaba un poco de retraso sobre la mía al respecto y que tampoco figuraba en la foto, concibió por ello una viva y tenaz envidia. Desde entonces se puso a disputarme de modo salvaje la palma del heroísmo. Inventaba historias nuevas, se superaba, nadie podía detenerlo, sus hazañas rayaban en el delirio.

Me resultaba difícil imaginar algo más animado, añadir algo más a tales exageraciones y, sin embargo, nadie en el hospital se resignaba; el caso era ver cuál de nosotros, picado por la emulación, inventaba a más y mejor otras «hermosas páginas guerreras» en las que figurar, sublime. Vivíamos un gran cantar de gesta, encarnando personajes fantásticos, en el fondo de los cuales temblábamos, ridículos, con todo el contenido de nuestras carnes y nuestras almas. Se habrían quedado de piedra, si nos hubieran sorprendido en la realidad. La guerra estaba madura.

Nuestro gran amigo Bestombes seguía recibiendo las visitas de numerosos notables extranjeros, señores científicos, neutrales, escépticos y curiosos. Los inspectores generales del ministerio pasaban, armados de sable y pimpantes, por nuestras salas, con la vida militar prolongada y, por tanto, rejuvenecidos e hinchados de nuevas dietas. Por eso, no escatimaban distinciones y elogios, los inspectores. Todo iba bien. Bestombes y sus magníficos heridos se convirtieron en el honor del servicio de Sanidad.

Mi bella protectora del «Francais» volvió pronto una vez más, a hacerme una visita particular, mientras su poeta familiar acababa el relato, rimado, de mis hazañas. Por fin conocí, en una esquina de un corredor, a aquel joven, pálido, ansioso. La fragilidad de las fibras de su corazón, según me confió, en opinión de los propios médicos, rayaba en el milagro. Por eso lo retenían, aquellos médicos preocupados por los seres frágiles, lejos de los ejércitos. A cambio, había emprendido, aquel humilde bardo, con riesgo incluso para su salud y para todas sus supremas fuerzas espirituales, la tarea de forjar, para nosotros, «el bronce moral de nuestra victoria». Una bella herramienta, por consiguiente, en versos inolvidables, desde luego, como todo lo demás.

¡No me iba yo a quejar, puesto que me había elegido entre tantos otros bravos innegables, para ser su héroe! Por lo demás, me favoreció, confesémoslo, espléndidamente. A decir verdad, fue magnífico. El acontecimiento del recital se produjo en la propia Comédie-Francaise, durante una así llamada sesión poética. Todo el hospital fue invitado. Cuando apareció en escena mi pelirroja, trémula recitadora, con gesto grandioso y el talle torneado en los pliegues, vueltos por fin voluptuosos, del tricolor, fue la señal para que la sala entera, de pie, ávida, ofreciera una de esas ovaciones que no acaban. Desde luego, yo estaba preparado, pero, aun así, mi asombro fue real, no pude ocultar mi estupefacción a mis vecinos al oírla vibrar, exhortar así, aquella amiga magnífica, gemir incluso, para volver más apreciable todo el drama que entrañaba el episodio por mí inventado para su uso particular. Evidentemente, su poeta me concedía puntos con la imaginación, hasta había magnificado monstruosamente la mía, ayudado por sus rimas floridas, con adjetivos formidables que iban a recaer solemnes en el supremo y admirativo silencio. Al llegar al desarrollo de un período, el más caluroso del pasaje, dirigiéndose al palco donde nos encontrábamos, Branledore y yo y algunos otros heridos, la artista, con sus dos espléndidos brazos extendidos, pareció ofrecerse al más heroico de nosotros. En aquel momento el poeta ilustraba con fervor un fantástico rasgo de bravura que yo me había atribuido. Ya no recuerdo bien lo que ocurría, pero no era cosa de poca monta. Por fortuna, nada es increíble en punto a heroísmo. El público adivinó el sentido de la ofrenda artística y la sala entera dirigida entonces hacia nosotros, gritando de gozo, transportada, trepidante, reclamaba al héroe.

Branledore acaparaba toda la parte delantera del palco y sobresalía de entre todos nosotros, pues podía taparnos casi completamente tras sus vendas. Lo hacía a propósito, el muy cabrón.

Pero dos de mis compañeros, que se habían subido a sillas detrás de él, se ofrecieron, de todos modos, a la admiración de la multitud por encima de sus hombros y su cabeza. Los aplaudieron a rabiar.

«Pero, ¡si se refiere a mí! – estuve a punto de gritar en aquel momento-. ¡A mí solo!» Me conocía yo a Branledore, nos habríamos insultado delante de todo el mundo y tal vez nos habríamos pegado incluso. Al

final, para él fue la perra gorda. Se impuso. Se quedó solo y triunfante, como deseaba, para recibir el tremendo homenaje. A los demás, vencidos, no nos quedaba otra opción que precipitarnos hacia los bastidores, cosa que hicimos y, por fortuna, fuimos festejados en ellos. Consuelo. Sin embargo, nuestra actriz-inspiradora no estaba sola en su camerino. A su lado se encontraba el poeta, su poeta, nuestro poeta. También él amaba, como ella, a los jóvenes soldados, muy tiernamente. Me lo hicieron comprender con arte. Buen negocio. Me lo repitieron, pero no tuve en cuenta sus amables indicaciones. Peor para mí, porque las cosas se habrían podido arreglar muy bien. Tenían mucha influencia. Me despedí bruscamente, ofendido como un tonto. Era joven.

Recapitulemos: los aviadores me habían robado a Lola, los argentinos me habían cogido a Musyne y, por último, aquel invertido armonioso acababa de soplarme mi soberbia comediante. Abandoné, desamparado, la Comedie mientras apagaban los últimos candelabros de los pasillos y volví, solo, de noche y a pie, a nuestro hospital, ratonera entre barros tenaces y suburbios insumisos.

No es por darme pisto, pero debo reconocer que mi cabeza nunca ha sido muy sólida. Pero es que entonces, por menos de nada, me daban mareos, como para caer bajo las ruedas de los coches. Titubeaba en la guerra. En punto a dinero para gastillos, sólo podía contar, durante mi estancia en el hospital, con los pocos francos que mi madre me daba todas las semanas con gran sacrificio. Por eso, en cuanto me fue posible, me puse a buscar pequeños suplementos, por aquí y por allá, donde pudiera encontrarlos. Uno de mis antiguos patronos fue el primero que me pareció propicio al respecto y en seguida recibió mi visita.

Recordé con toda oportunidad que había trabajado en tiempos obscuros en casa de aquel Roger Puta, el joyero de la Madeleine, en calidad de empleado suplente, un poco antes de la declaración de la guerra. Mi tarea en casa de aquel joyero asqueroso consistía en «extras», en limpiar la plata de su tienda, numerosa, variada y, en épocas de regalos, difícil de mantener limpia, por los continuos manoseos.

En cuanto acababa en la facultad, donde seguía estudios rigurosos e interminables (por los exámenes en los que fracasaba), volvía al galope a la trastienda del Sr. Puta y pasaba dos o tres horas luchando con sus chocolateras, a base de «blanco de España», hasta la hora de la cena.

A cambio de mi trabajo me daban de comer, abundantemente por cierto, en la cocina. Por otra parte, mi currelo consistía también en llevar a pasear y mear los perros de guarda de la tienda antes de ir a clase. Todo ello por cuarenta francos al mes. La joyería Puta centelleaba con mil diamantes en la esquina de la Rué Vignon y cada uno de aquellos diamantes costaba tanto como varios decenios de mi salario. Por cierto, que aún siguen brillando en ella, esos diamantes. Aquel patrón Puta, destinado a servicios auxiliares cuando la movilización, se puso a servir en particular a un ministro, cuyo automóvil conducía de vez en cuando. Pero, por otro lado, y ello de forma totalmente oficiosa, prestaba, Puta, servicios de lo más útiles, suministrando las joyas del Ministerio. El personal de las altas esferas especulaba con gran fortuna con los mercados cerrados y por cerrar. Cuanto más avanzaba la guerra, mayor necesidad había de joyas. El Sr. Puta recibía tantos pedidos, que a veces encontraba dificultades para atenderlos.

Cuando estaba agotado, el Sr. Puta llegaba a adquirir una pequeña expresión de inteligencia, por la fatiga que lo atormentaba y sólo en esos momentos. Pero en reposo, su rostro, pese a la finura innegable de sus facciones, formaba una armonía de placidez tonta, de la que resultaba difícil no conservar para siempre un recuerdo desesperante.

Su mujer, la Sra. Puta, era una sola cosa con la caja de la casa, de la que no se apartaba, por así decir, nunca. La habían educado para ser la esposa de un joyero. Ambición de padres. Conocía su deber, todo su deber. La pareja era feliz, al tiempo que la caja era próspera. No es que fuese fea, la Sra. Puta, no, incluso habría podido ser bastante bonita, como tantas otras, sólo que era tan prudente, tan desconfiada, que se detenía al borde de la belleza, como al borde de la vida, con sus cabellos demasiado peinados, su sonrisa demasiado fácil y repentina, gestos demasiado rápidos o demasiado furtivos. Irritaba intentar distinguir lo que de demasiado calculado había en aquel ser y las razones del malestar que experimentabas, pese a todo, al acercarte a ella. Esa repulsión instintiva que inspiran los comerciantes a los avisados que se acercan a ellos es uno de los muy escasos consuelos de ser pobres diablillos que tienen quienes no venden nada a nadie.

Así, pues, era presa total de las mezquinas preocupaciones del comercio, la Sra. Puta, exactamente como la Sra. Herote, pero en otro estilo, y del mismo modo que las religiosas son presa, en cuerpo y alma, de Dios.

Sin embargo, de vez en cuando, sentía, nuestra patrona, como una preocupación de circunstancias. Así sucedía que se abandonara hasta llegar a pensar en los padres de los combatientes. «De todos modos, ¡qué desgracia esta guerra para quienes tienen hijos mayores!»

«Pero, bueno, ¡piensa antes de hablar! – la reprendía al instante su marido, a quien esas sensiblerías encontraban siempre listo y resuelto-. ¿Es que no hay que defender a Francia?»

Así, personas de buen corazón, pero por encima de todo buenos patriotas, estoicos, en una palabra, se quedaban dormidos todas las noches de la guerra encima de los millones de su tienda, fortuna francesa.

En los burdeles que frecuentaba de vez en cuando, el Sr. Puta se mostraba exigente y deseoso de que no lo tomaran por un pródigo. «Yo no soy un inglés, nena -avisaba desde el principio-. ¡Sé lo que es trabajar! ¡Soy un soldadito francés sin prisas!» Tal era su declaración preliminar. Las mujeres lo apreciaban mucho por esa forma sensata de abordar el placer. Gozador pero no pardillo, un hombre. Aprovechaba el hecho de conocer su mundo para realizar algunas transacciones de joyas con la ayudante de la patrona, quien no creía en las inversiones en Bolsa. El Sr. Puta progresaba de forma sorprendente desde el punto de vista militar, de

licencias temporales a prorrogas definitivas. No tardó en quedar del todo libre, tras no sé cuántas visitas médicas oportunas. Contaba como uno de los goces más altos de su existencia la contemplación y, de ser posible, la palpación de pantorrillas hermosas. Era un placer por el que al menos superaba a su esposa, entregada en exclusiva al comercio. Con calidades iguales, siempre encontramos, al parecer, un poco más de inquietud en el hombre, por limitado que sea, por corrompido que esté, que en la mujer. En resumen, era un artistilla en ciernes, aquel Puta. Muchos hombres, en punto a arte, se quedan siempre, como él, en la manía de las pantorrillas hermosas. La Sra. Puta estaba muy contenta de no tener hijos. Manifestaba con tanta frecuencia su satisfacción por ser estéril, que su marido, a su vez, acabó comunicando su contento común a la ayudante de la patrona. «Sin embargo, por fuerza tienen que ir los hijos de alguien -respondía ésta, a su vez-, ¡pues es un deber!» Es cierto que la guerra imponía deberes.

El ministro al que servía Puta en el automóvil tampoco tenía hijos: los ministros no tienen hijos.

Hacia 1913, otro empleado auxiliar trabajaba conmigo en los pequeños quehaceres de la tienda; era Jean Voireuse, un poco «comparsa» por la noche en los teatrillos y por la tarde repartidor en la tienda de Puta. También él se contentaba con sueldos mínimos. Pero se las arreglaba gracias al metro. Iba casi tan rápido a pie como en metro para hacer los recados. Conque se quedaba con el precio del metro. Todo sisas. Le olían un poco los pies, cierto es, mucho incluso, pero lo sabía y me pedía que le avisara, cuando no había clientes en la tienda, para poder entrar sin perjuicio y hacer las cuentas con la Sra. Puta. Una vez cobrado el dinero, lo enviaban al instante a reunirse conmigo en la trastienda. Los pies le sirvieron mucho durante la guerra. Tenía fama de ser el agente de enlace más rápido de su regimiento. Durante la convalecencia, vino a verme al fuerte de Bicetre y fue incluso con ocasión de esa visita cuando decidimos ir juntos a dar un sablazo a nuestro antiguo patrón. Dicho y hecho. En el momento en que llegábamos por el Bulevard de la Madeleine, estaban acabando de instalar el escaparate…

«¡Hombre! ¿Vosotros aquí? – se extrañó un poco de vemos el Sr. Puta-. De todos modos, ¡me alegro! ¡Entrad! Tú, Voireuse, ¡tienes buen aspecto! ¡Eso es bueno! Pero tú, Bardamu, ¡pareces enfermo, muchacho! ¡En fin! ¡Eres joven! ¡Ya te recuperarás! A pesar de todo, ¡tenéis potra, chicos! Se diga lo que se diga, estáis viviendo momentos magníficos, ¿eh? ¿Allí arriba? ¡Y al aire! Eso es Historia, amigos, ¡os lo digo yo! ¡Y qué Historia!»

No le respondíamos nada al Sr. Puta, le dejábamos decir todo lo que quisiera antes de darle el sablazo… Conque continuaba:

«¡Ah! ¡Es duro, lo reconozco, estar en las trincheras!… ¡Es cierto! Pero, ¡aquí, verdad, también es duro de lo lindo!… ¿Que a vosotros os han herido? ¡Y yo estoy reventado! ¡Hace dos años que hago servicios de noche por la ciudad! ¿Os dais cuenta? ¡Imaginaos! ¡Absolutamente reventado! ¡Deshecho! ¡Ah, las calles de París por la noche! Sin luz, chicos… ¡Y conduciendo un auto y muchas veces con el ministro! ¡Y, encima, a toda velocidad! ¡No os podéis imaginar!… ¡Como para matarse diez veces todas las noches!…»

«Sí -confirmó la señora Puta-, y a veces conduce a la esposa del ministro también…»

«¡Ah, sí! Y no acaba ahí la cosa…»

«¡Es terrible!», comentamos al unísono.

«¿Y los perros? – preguntó Voireuse para mostrarse educado-. ¿Qué han hecho de ellos? ¿Todavía los llevan a pasear por las Tullerías?»

«¡Los mandé matar! ¡Eran un perjuicio para la tienda!… ¡Pastores alemanes!»

«¡Es una pena! – lamentó su mujer-. Pero los nuevos perros que tenemos ahora son muy agradables, son escoceses… Huelen un poco… Mientras que nuestros pastores alemanes, ¿recuerdas, Voireuse?… Se puede decir que no olían nunca. Podíamos dejarlos encerrados en la tienda, incluso después de la lluvia…»

«¡Ah, sí! – añadió el Sr. Puta-. No como ese jodio Voireuse con sus pies! ¿Aún te huelen los pies, Jean? ¡Anda, jodio Voireuse!»

«Me parece que un poco aún», respondió Voireuse.

En ese momento entraron unos clientes.

«No os retengo más, amigos míos -nos dijo el Sr. Puta, deseoso de eliminar a Jean de la tienda cuanto antes-. ¡Y que haya salud, sobre todo! ¡No os pregunto de dónde venís! ¡Ah, no! La Defensa Nacional ante todo, ¡ésa es mi opinión!»

Al decir Defensa Nacional, se puso muy serio, Puta, como cuando devolvía el cambio… Así nos despedían. La Sra. Puta nos entregó veinte francos a cada uno, al marcharnos. Ya no nos atrevíamos a cruzar de nuevo la tienda, lustrosa y reluciente como un yate, por nuestros zapatos, que parecían monstruosos sobre la fina alfombra.

«¡Ah! ¡Míralos, a los dos, Roger! ¡Qué graciosos están!… ¡Han perdido la costumbre! ¡Parece que hubieran pisado una mierda!», exclamó la Sra. Puta.

«¡Ya se les pasará!», dijo el Sr. Puta, cordial y bonachón y muy contento de librarse tan pronto de nosotros y por tan poco.

Una vez en la calle, pensamos que no llegaríamos demasiado lejos con veinte francos cada uno, pero Voireuse tenía otra idea.

«Vente -me dijo- a casa de la madre de un amigo que murió cuando estábamos en el Mosa; yo voy todas las semanas, a casa de sus padres, para contarles cómo murió su chaval… Son gente rica… Me da unos cien francos todas las veces, su madre… Dicen que les gusta escucharme… Conque como comprenderás…»

«¿Qué cojones voy a ir yo a hacer en su casa? ¿Qué le voy a decir a la madre?»

«Pues le dices que lo viste, tú también… Te dará cien francos también a ti… ¡Son gente rica de verdad! ¡Te lo digo yo! No se parecen a ese patán de Puta… Ésos no miran el dinero…»

«De acuerdo, pero, ¿estás seguro de que no me va a preguntar detalles?… Porque yo no lo conocí a su hijo, eh… Voy a estar pez, si me pregunta…»

«No, no, no importa, di lo mismo que yo… Di: sí, sí… ¡No te preocupes! Está apenada, compréndelo, esa mujer, y como le hablamos de su hijo, se pone contenta… Sólo pide eso… Cualquier cosa… Está chupado…»

Yo no conseguía decidirme, pero deseaba con ganas los cien francos, que me parecían excepcionalmente fáciles de obtener y como providenciales.

«Vale -me decidí al final-. Pero siempre que no tenga que inventar nada, ¡eh! ¡Te aviso! ¿Me lo prometes? Diré lo mismo que tú, nada más… Vamos a ver, ¿cómo murió el chaval?»

«Recibió un obús en plena jeta, chico, y, además, de los grandes, en Garance, así se llamaba el sitio… en el Mosa, al borde de un río… No se encontró "ni esto" del muchacho, ¡fíjate! O sea, que sólo quedó el recuerdo… Y eso que era alto, verdad, y buen mozo, el chaval, y fuerte y deportista, pero contra un obús, ¿no? ¡No hay resistencia!»

«¡Es verdad!»

«Visto y no visto, vamos… ¡A su madre aún le cuesta creerlo hoy! De nada sirve que yo le cuente y vuelva a contar… Cree que sólo ha desaparecido… Es una idea absurda… ¡Desaparecido!… No es culpa suya, nunca ha visto un obús, no puede comprender que alguien se desintegre así, como un pedo, y se acabó, sobre todo porque era su hijo…»

«¡Claro, claro!»

«En fin, hace quince días que no he ido a verlos… Pero vas a ver, cuando llegue, me recibe en seguida, la madre, en el salón, y, además, es que es una casa muy bonita, parece un teatro, de tantas cortinas como hay, alfombras, espejos por todos lados… Cien francos, como comprenderás, no deben de significar nada para ellos… Como para mí un franco, poco más o menos… Hoy hasta puede que me dé doscientos… Hace quince días que no la he visto… Vas a ver a los criados con los botones dorados, chico…»

En la Avenue Henri-Martin, se giraba a la izquierda y después se avanzaba un poco y, por fin, se llegaba ante una verja en medio de los árboles de una pequeña alameda privada.

«¿Ves? – observó Voireuse, cuando estuvimos justo delante-. Es como un castillo… Ya te lo había dicho… El padre es un mandamás en los ferrocarriles, según me han contado… Un baranda…»

«¿No será jefe de estación?», dije en broma.

«Vete a paseo… Míralo, por ahí baja… Viene hacia aquí…»

Pero el hombre de edad al que señalaba no llegó en seguida, caminaba encorvado en torno al césped e iba hablando con un soldado. Nos acercamos. Reconocí al soldado, era el mismo reservista que había encontrado la noche de Noirceur-sur-la-Lys, estando de reconocimiento. Incluso recordé al instante el nombre que me había dicho: Robinson.

«¿Conoces a ese de infantería?», me preguntó Voireuse.

«Sí, lo conozco.»

«Tal vez sea amigo de ellos… Deben de hablar de la madre; ojalá que no nos impidan ir a verla… Porque es ella más bien quien suelta la pasta…»

El anciano se acercó a nosotros. Le temblaba la voz.

«Querido amigo -dijo a Voireuse-, tengo el dolor de comunicarle que después de su última visita mi pobre mujer sucumbió a nuestra inmensa pena… El jueves la habíamos dejado sola un momento, nos lo había pedido… Lloraba…»

No pudo acabar la frase. Se volvió bruscamente y se alejó.

«Te reconozco», dije entonces a Robinson, en cuanto el anciano se hubo alejado lo suficiente de nosotros.

«Yo también te reconozco…»

«Oye, ¿qué le ha ocurrido a la vieja?», le pregunté entonces.

«Pues que se ahorcó ayer, ¡ya ves! – respondió-. ¡Qué mala pata, chico! – añadió incluso al respecto-. ¡La tenía de madrina!… Mira que tengo suerte, ¡eh! ¡Eso es lo que se dice giba! ¡La primera vez que venía de permiso!… Y hacía seis meses que esperaba este día…»

No pudimos reprimir la risa, Voireuse y yo, ante la desgracia de Robinson. Desde luego, era una sorpresa desagradable; sólo, que eso no nos devolvía nuestros doscientos pavos, que hubiera muerto, a nosotros que íbamos a inventarnos una nueva bola para el caso. De repente, no estábamos contentos, ni unos ni otros.

«Conque te las prometías muy felices, ¿eh, cabroncete? – lo chinchábamos, a Robinson, para tomarle el pelo-. Creías que te ibas a dar una comilona de aúpa, ¿eh?, con los viejos. Quizá creyeras que te la ibas a cepillar también, a la madrina… Pues, ¡vas listo, macho!…»

Como, de todos modos, no podíamos quedarnos allí mirando el césped y desternillándonos de risa, nos fuimos los tres juntos hacia Grenelle. Contamos el dinero que teníamos entre los tres, no era mucho. Como teníamos que volver esa misma noche a nuestros hospitales y depósitos respectivos, teníamos lo justo para cenar en una taberna los tres y después tal vez quedara un poquito, pero no bastante, para ir de putas. Sin embargo, fuimos al picadero, pero sólo para tomar una copa abajo.

«A ti me alegro de verte -me anunció Robinson-, pero anda, que la tía ésa, ¡la madre del chaval!… De todos

modos, cuando lo pienso, ¡mira que ir a ahorcarse el día mismo que yo llego!… No me lo puedo quitar de la cabeza… ¿Acaso me ahorco yo?… ¿De pena?… Entonces, ¡yo tendría que pasar la vida ahorcándome!… ¿Y tú?»

«La gente rica -dijo Voireuse- es más sensible que los demás.»

Tenía buen corazón, Voireuse. Añadió: «Si tuviera seis francos, subiría con esa morenita de ahí, junto a la máquina tragaperras…»

«Ve -le dijimos nosotros entonces-, y después nos cuentas si chupa bien…»

Sólo, que, por mucho que buscamos, no teníamos bastante, incluida la propina, para que pudiera tirársela. Teníamos lo justo para tomar otro café cada uno y dos copas. Una vez que nos las soplamos, ¡volvimos a salir de paseo!

En la Place Vendóme acabamos separándonos. Cada uno se iba por su lado. Al despedirnos, casi no nos veíamos y hablábamos muy bajo, por los ecos. No había luz, estaba prohibido.

A Jean Voireuse no lo volví a ver nunca. A Robinson volví a encontrármelo muchas veces en adelante. Fueron los gases los que acabaron con Jean Voireuse, en Somme. Fue a acabar al borde del mar, en Bretaña, dos años después, en un sanatorio marino. Al principio me escribió dos veces, luego nada. Nunca había estado junto al mar. «No te puedes imaginar lo bonito que es -me escribía-, tomo algunos baños, es bueno para los pies, pero creo que tengo la voz completamente jodida.» Eso le fastidiaba porque su ambición, en el fondo, era la de poder volver un día a los coros del teatro.

Los coros están mucho mejor pagados y son más artísticos que las simples comparsas.

Los barandas acabaron soltándome y pude salvar el pellejo, pero quedé marcado en la cabeza y para siempre. ¡Qué le íbamos a hacer! «¡Vete!… -me dijeron-. ¡Ya no sirves para nada!…»

«¡A África! – me dije-. Cuanto más lejos, ¡mejor!» Era un barco como los demás de la Compañía de los Corsarios Reunidos el que me llevó. Iba hacia los trópicos, con su carga de cotonadas, oficiales y funcionarios.

Era tan viejo, aquel barco, que le habían quitado hasta la placa de cobre de la cubierta superior, donde en tiempos aparecía escrito el año de nacimiento; databa de tan antiguo su nacimiento, que habría inspirado miedo a los pasajeros y también cachondeo.

Conque me embarcaron en él para que intentara restablecerme en las colonias. Quienes bien me querían deseaban que hiciera fortuna. Por mi parte, yo sólo tenía ganas de irme, pero, como, cuando no eres rico, siempre tienes que parecer útil y como, por otro lado, nunca acababa mis estudios, la cosa no podía continuar así. Tampoco tenía dinero suficiente para ir a América. «Pues, ¡a África!», dije entonces y me dejé llevar hacia los trópicos, donde, según me aseguraban, bastaba con un poco de templanza y buena conducta para labrarse pronto una situación.

Aquellos pronósticos me dejaban perplejo. No tenía muchas cosas a mi favor, pero, desde luego, tenía buenos modales, de eso no había duda, actitud modesta, deferencia fácil y miedo siempre de no llegar a tiempo y, además, el deseo de no pasar por encima de nadie en la vida, en fin, delicadeza…

Cuando has podido escapar de un matadero internacional enloquecido, no deja de ser una referencia en cuanto a tacto y discreción. Pero volvamos a aquel viaje. Mientras permanecimos en aguas europeas, la cosa no se anunciaba mal. Los pasajeros enmohecían repartidos en la sombra de los entrepuentes, en los WC, en el fumadero, en grupitos suspicaces y gangosos. Todos ellos bien embebidos de *amer piçons* y chismes, de la mañana a la noche. Eructaban, dormitaban y vociferaban, sucesivamente, y, al parecer, sin añorar nunca nada de Europa.

Nuestro navío se llamaba el *Amiral-Bragueton.* Debía de mantenerse sobre aquellas aguas tibias sólo gracias a su pintura. Tantas capas acumuladas, como pieles de cebolla, habían acabado constituyendo una especie de segundo casco en el *Amiral-Bragueton.* Bogábamos hacia África, la verdadera, la grande, la de selvas insondables, miasmas deletéreas, soledades invioladas, hacia los grandes tiranos negros repantigados en las confluencias de ríos sin fin. Por un paquete de hojas de afeitar Pilett iba yo a sacarles marfiles así de largos, aves resplandecientes, esclavas menores de edad. Me lo habían prometido. ¡Vida de obispo, vamos! Nada en común con esa África descortezada de las agencias y monumentos, los ferrocarriles y el guirlache. ¡Ah, no! Nosotros íbamos a verla en su jugo, ¡el África auténtica! ¡Nosotros, los pasajeros del *Amiral-Bragueton,* que no dejábamos de darle a la priva!

Pero, tras pasar ante las costas de Portugal, las cosas empezaron a estropearse. Irresistiblemente, cierta mañana, al despertar, nos vimos como dominados por un ambiente de estufa infinitamente tibio, inquietante. El agua en los vasos, el mar, el aire, las sábanas, nuestro sudor, todo, tibio, caliente. En adelante imposible, de noche, de día, tener ya nada fresco en la mano, bajo el trasero, en la garganta, salvo el hielo del bar con el whisky. Entonces una vil desesperación se abatió sobre los pasajeros del *Amiral-Bragueton,* condenados a no alejarse más del bar, embrujados, pegados a los ventiladores, soldados a los cubitos de hielo, intercambiando amenazas después de las cartas y disculpas en cadencias incoherentes.

No hubo que esperar mucho. En aquella estabilidad desesperante de calor, todo el contenido humano del navío se coaguló en una borrachera masiva. Nos movíamos remolones entre los puentes, como pulpos en el fondo de una bañera de agua estancada. Desde aquel momento vimos desplegarse a flor de piel la angustiosa naturaleza de los blancos, provocada, liberada, bien a la vista por fin, su auténtica naturaleza de verdad, igualito que en la guerra. Estufa tropical para instintos, semejantes a los sapos y víboras que salen por fin a la luz, en el mes de agosto, por los flancos agrietados de las cárceles. En el frío de Europa, bajo las púdicas

nieblas del Norte, aparte de las matanzas, tan sólo se sospecha la hormigueante crueldad de nuestros hermanos, pero, en cuanto los excita la fiebre innoble de los trópicos, su corrupción invade la superficie. Entonces nos destapamos como locos y la porquería triunfa y nos recubre por entero. Es la confesión biológica. Desde el momento en que el trabajo y el frío dejan de coartarnos, aflojan un poco sus tenazas, descubrimos en los blancos lo mismo que en la alegre ribera, una vez que el mar se retira: la verdad, charcas pestilentes, cangrejos, carroña y zurullos.

Así, pasado Portugal, todo el mundo, en el navío, se puso a liberar los instintos con rabia, ayudado por el alcohol y también por esa sensación de satisfacción íntima que procura una gratuidad de viaje absoluta, sobre todo a los militares y funcionarios en activo. Sentirse alimentado, alojado y abrevado gratis durante cuatro semanas seguidas, es bastante, por sí solo, ¿no?, al pensarlo, para delirar de economía. Por consiguiente, yo, el único que pagaba el viaje, parecí, en cuanto se supo esa particularidad, singularmente descarado, del todo insoportable.

Si hubiera tenido alguna experiencia de los medios coloniales, al salir de Marsella, habría ido, compañero indigno, a pedir de rodillas perdón, indulgencia a aquel oficial de infantería colonial que me encontraba por todas partes, el de graduación más alta, y a humillarme, además, tal vez, para mayor seguridad, a los pies del funcionario más antiguo. ¿Quizás entonces me habrían tolerado entre ellos sin inconveniente aquellos pasajeros fantásticos? Pero mi inconsciente pretensión de respirar, ignorante de mí, en torno a ellos estuvo a punto de costarme la vida.

Nunca se es bastante temeroso. Gracias a cierta habilidad, sólo perdí el amor propio que me quedaba. Veamos cómo ocurrió. Algo después de pasar las islas Canarias, supe por un camarero que todos estaban de acuerdo en considerarme presumido, insolente incluso… Que me suponían chulo de putas y al mismo tiempo pederasta… Un poco cocainómano incluso… Pero eso por añadidura… Después se abrió paso la idea de que debía de huir de Francia ante las consecuencias de fechorías de lo más graves. Sin embargo, eso sólo era el comienzo de mis adversidades. Entonces me enteré de la costumbre impuesta en aquella línea: la de no aceptar sino con extrema circunspección, acompañada, por cierto, de novatadas, a los pasajeros que pagaban, es decir, los que no gozaban ni de la gratuidad militar ni de los convenios burocráticos, pues las colonias francesas, como es sabido, eran propiedad exclusiva de la nobleza de los *Anuarios*.

Al fin y al cabo, existen muy pocas razones válidas para que un civil desconocido se aventure en esa dirección… Espía, sospechoso, encontraron mil razones para mirarme con mala cara, los oficiales a los ojos, las mujeres con sonrisa convenida. Pronto, hasta los propios criados, alentados, intercambiaban a mi espalda comentarios de lo más cáusticos. Al final, nadie dudaba que yo era el mayor y más insoportable granuja a bordo y, por así decir, el único. La cosa prometía.

Mis vecinos de mesa eran cuatro agentes de correos de Gabón, hepáticos, desdentados. Familiares y cordiales al principio de la travesía, después no me dirigieron ni una triste palabra. Es decir, que, por acuerdo tácito, me colocaron en régimen de vigilancia común. Llegó un momento en que no salía de mi camarote sino con infinitas precauciones. La atmósfera de horno nos pesaba sobre la piel como un cuerpo sólido. En cueros y con el cerrojo echado, ya no me movía e intentaba imaginar qué plan podían haber concebido los diabólicos pasajeros para perderme. No conocía a nadie a bordo y, sin embargo, todo el mundo parecía reconocerme. Mis señas particulares debían de haber quedado grabadas instantáneamente en sus mentes, como las del criminal célebre que se publican en los periódicos.

Desempeñaba, sin quererlo, el papel del indispensable «infame y repugnante canalla», vergüenza del género humano, señalado por todos lados a lo largo de los siglos, del que todo el mundo ha oído hablar, igual que del Diablo y de Dios, pero que siempre es tan distinto, tan huidizo, en la tierra y en la vida, inaprensible, en resumidas cuentas. Habían sido necesarias, para aislarlo, «al canalla», para identificarlo, sujetarlo, las circunstancias excepcionales que sólo se daban en aquel estrecho barco.

Un auténtico regocijo general y moral se anunciaba a bordo del *Amiral-Bragueton.* «El inmundo» no iba a escapar a su suerte. Era yo.

Por sí solo, aquel acontecimiento bien valía el viaje. Recluido entre aquellos enemigos espontáneos, intentaba yo, a duras penas, identificarlos sin que lo advirtieran. Para lograrlo, los espiaba impunemente, sobre todo de mañana, por la ventanilla de mi camarote. Antes del desayuno, tomando el fresco, peludos del pubis a las cejas y del recto a la planta de los pies, en pijama, transparentes al sol; tendidos a lo largo de la borda, con el vaso en la mano, venían a eructar allí, mis enemigos, y amenazaban ya con vomitar alrededor, sobre todo el capitán de ojos saltones e inyectados, a quien el hígado atormentaba de lo lindo, desde la aurora. Al despertar, preguntaba sin falta por mí a los otros guasones, si aún no me habían «tirado por la borda», según decía, «¡como un gargajo!». Para ilustrar lo que quería decir, escupía al mismo tiempo en el mar espumoso. ¡Qué cachondeo!

El *Amiral* apenas avanzaba, se arrastraba más que nada, ronroneando, entre uno y otro balanceo. Ya es que no era un viaje, era una enfermedad. Los miembros de aquel concilio matinal, al examinarlos desde mi rincón, me parecían todos profundamente enfermos, palúdicos, alcohólicos, sifilíticos seguramente; su decadencia, visible a diez metros, me consolaba un poco de mis preocupaciones personales. Al fin y al cabo, ¡eran unos vencidos, tanto como yo, aquellos matones!… ¡Aún fanfarroneaban, simplemente! ¡La única diferencia! Los mosquitos se habían encargado ya de chuparlos y destilarles en plenas venas esos venenos que no desaparecen nunca… El treponema les estaba ya limando las arterias… El alcohol les roía el hígado… El sol les

resquebrajaba los riñones… Las ladillas se les pegaban a los pelos y el eczema a la piel del vientre… ¡La luz cegadora acabaría achicharrándoles la retina!… Dentro de poco, ¿qué les iba a quedar? Un trozo de cerebro… ¿Para qué? ¿Me lo queréis decir?… ¿Allí donde iban? ¿Para suicidarse? Sólo podía servirles para eso, un cerebro, allí donde iban… Digan lo que digan, no es divertido envejecer en los países en que no hay distracciones… Te ves obligado a mirarte al espejo, cuyo azogue enmohece, y verte cada vez más decaído, cada vez más feo… No tardas en pudrirte, entre el verdor, sobre todo cuando hace un calor atroz.

Al menos el Norte conserva las carnes; la gente del Norte es pálida de una vez para siempre. Entre un sueco muerto y un joven que ha dormido mal, poca diferencia hay. Pero el colonial está ya cubierto de gusanos un día después de desembarcar. Los esperaban impacientes, esas vermes infinitamente laboriosas, y no los soltarían hasta mucho después de haber cruzado el límite de la vida. Sacos de larvas.

Nos faltaban aún ocho días de mar antes de hacer escala en Bragamance, primera tierra prometida. Yo tenía la sensación de encontrarme dentro de una caja de explosivos. Ya apenas comía para no acudir a su mesa ni atravesar los entrepuentes en pleno día. Ya no decía ni palabra. Nunca me veían de paseo. Era difícil estar tan poco como yo en el barco, aun viviendo en él.

Mi camarero, padre de familia él, tuvo a bien confiarme que los brillantes oficiales de la colonial habían jurado, con el vaso en la mano, abofetearme a la primera ocasión y después tirarme por la borda. Cuando le preguntaba por qué, no sabía y me preguntaba, a su vez, qué había hecho yo para llegar a ese extremo. Nos quedábamos con la duda. Aquello podía durar mucho tiempo. No gustaba mi jeta y se acabó.

Nunca más se me ocurriría viajar con gente tan difícil de contentar. Estaban tan desocupados, además, encerrados durante treinta días consigo mismos, que les bastaba muy poco para apasionarse. Por lo demás, no hay que olvidar que en la vida corriente cien individuos por lo menos a lo largo de una sola jornada muy ordinaria desean quitarte tu pobre vida: por ejemplo, todos aquellos a quienes molestas, apretujados en la cola del metro detrás de ti, todos aquellos también que pasan delante de tu piso y que no tienen dónde vivir, todos los que esperan a que acabes de hacer pipí para hacerlo ellos, tus hijos, por último, y tantos otros. Es incesante. Te acabas acostumbrando. En el barco el apiñamiento se nota más, conque es más molesto.

En esa olla que cuece a fuego lento, el churre de esos seres escaldados se concentra, los presentimientos de la soledad colonial que los va a sepultar pronto, a ellos y su destino, los hace gemir, ya como agonizantes. Se chocan, muerden, laceran, babean. Mi importancia a bordo aumentaba prodigiosamente de un día para otro. Mis raras llegadas a la mesa, por furtivas y silenciosas que procurara hacerlas, cobraban carácter de auténticos acontecimientos. En cuanto entraba en el comedor, los ciento veinte pasajeros se sobresaltaban, cuchicheaban…

Los oficiales de la colonial, bien cargados de aperitivo tras aperitivo en torno a la mesa del comandante, los recaudadores de impuestos, las institutrices congoleñas sobre todo, de las que el *Amiral-Bragueton* llevaba un buen surtido, habían acabado, entre suposiciones malévolas y deducciones difamatorias, atribuyéndome una importancia infernal.

Al embarcar en Marsella, yo no era sino un soñador insignificante, pero ahora, a consecuencia de aquella concentración irritada de alcohólicos y vaginas impacientes, me encontraba irreconocible, dotado de un prestigio inquietante.

El comandante del navío, gran bribón astuto y verrugoso, que con gusto me estrechaba la mano al comienzo de la travesía cada vez que nos encontrábamos, ahora no parecía ya reconocerme siquiera, igual que se evita a un hombre buscado por un feo asunto, culpable ya… ¿De qué? Cuando el odio de los hombres no entraña riesgo alguno, su estupidez se deja convencer rápido, los motivos vienen solos.

Por lo que me parecía discernir en la malevolencia compacta en que me debatía, una de las señoritas institutrices animaba al elemento femenino de la conjuración. Volvía al Congo, a diñarla, al menos así lo esperaba yo, la muy puta. Apenas se separaba de los oficiales coloniales de torso torneado en la tela resplandeciente y adornados, además, con el juramento que habían pronunciado de machacarme como una infecta babosa, ni más ni menos, mucho antes de la próxima escala. Se preguntaban por turno si yo sería tan repugnante aplastado como entero. En resumen, se divertían. Aquella señorita atizaba su inspiración, reclamaba la borrasca contra mí en el puente del *Amiral-Bragueton,* no quería conocer descanso hasta que por fin me hubieran recogido jadeante, enmendado para siempre de mi impertinencia imaginaria, castigado por haber osado existir, golpeado con rabia, en una palabra, sangrando, magullado, implorando piedad bajo la bota y el puño de uno de aquellos cachas, cuya acción muscular y furia espléndida ardía en deseos de admirar. Escena de alta carnicería en la que sus fiados ovarios presentían un despertar. Valía tanto como ser violada por un gorila. El tiempo pasaba y es peligroso retrasar demasiado las corridas. Yo era el toro. El barco entero lo exigía, estremeciéndose hasta las bodegas.

El mar nos encerraba en aquel ruedo empernado. Hasta los maquinistas estaban al corriente. Y como ya sólo quedaban tres días para la escala, jornadas decisivas, varios toreros se ofrecieron. Y cuanto más huía yo del escándalo, más agresivos e inminentes se volvían conmigo. Ya se entrenaban los sacrificadores. Me acorralaron entre dos camarotes, contra un lienzo de pared. Escapé por los pelos, pero llegó a serme francamente peligroso el simple hecho de ir al retrete. Así, pues, cuando ya sólo teníamos por delante esos tres días de mar, aproveché para renunciar definitivamente a todas mis necesidades naturales. Me bastaban las ventanillas. A mi alrededor todo era agobiante de odio y aburrimiento. Debo decir también que es increíble, ese aburrimiento de a bordo, cósmico, por hablar con franqueza. Cubre el mar, el barco y los cielos. Sería

capaz de volver excéntrica a gente sólida, con mayor razón a aquellos brutos quiméricos.

¡Un sacrificio! Me iban a someter a él. Los acontecimientos se precipitaron una noche, después de la cena, a la que, sin embargo, no había podido dejar de acudir, acuciado por el hambre. No había levantado la nariz del plato y ni siquiera me había atrevido a sacar el pañuelo del bolsillo para limpiarme. Nadie ha jalado jamás más discreto que yo en aquella ocasión. De las máquinas te subía, estando sentado, hacia el trasero, una vibración incesante y tenue. Mis vecinos de mesa debían de estar al corriente de lo que habían decidido en relación conmigo, pues para mi sorpresa, se pusieron a hablarme por extenso y con gusto de duelos y estocadas, a hacerme preguntas… En aquel momento también, la institutriz del Congo, la que tenía tan mal aliento, se dirigió hacia el salón. Tuve tiempo de notar que llevaba un vestido de encaje, muy pomposo, y se acercaba al piano con una como prisa crispada, para tocar, si se puede decir así, tonadas que dejaba sin concluir. El ambiente se volvió intensamente nervioso y furtivo.

Di un salto para ir a refugiarme en mi camarote. Estaba a punto de alcanzarlo, cuando uno de los capitanes de la colonial, el más echado para adelante, el más musculoso de todos, me cortó el paso, sin violencia, pero con firmeza. «Subamos al puente», me ordenó. Al instante estábamos arriba. Para aquella ocasión, llevaba su quepis más dorado, se había abotonado enteramente del cuello a la bragueta, cosa que no había hecho desde nuestra partida. Estábamos, pues, en plena ceremonia dramática. No me llegaba la camisa al cuerpo y el corazón me latía a la altura del ombligo.

Aquel preámbulo, aquella impecabilidad anormal, me hicieron presagiar una ejecución lenta y dolorosa. Aquel hombre me daba la sensación de un fragmento de la guerra colocado de repente en mi camino, testarudo, tarado, asesino.

Detrás de él, cerrándome la puerta del entrepuente, se alzaban al tiempo cuatro oficiales subalternos, atentos en extremo, escolta de la fatalidad.

No había, pues, medio de escapar. Aquella interpelación debía de estar minuciosamente preparada. «¡Señor, ante usted el capitán Frémizon de las tropas coloniales! En nombre de mis compañeros y del pasaje de este barco, con razón indignados por su incalificable conducta, ¡tengo el honor de pedirle una explicación!… ¡Ciertas declaraciones que ha hecho usted respecto a nosotros desde la salida de Marsella son inaceptables!… ¡Ha llegado el momento, señor mío, de expresar bien alto sus quejas!… ¡De proclamar lo que vergonzosamente cuenta por lo bajo desde hace veintiún días! De decirnos al fin lo que piensa…»

Al oír aquellas palabras, sentí un inmenso alivio. Había temido una ejecución irremediable, pero, ya que el capitán hablaba, me ofrecían una escapatoria. Me precipité a aprovechar la oportunidad. Toda posibilidad de cobardía se convierte en una esperanza magnífica a quien sabe lo que se trae entre manos. Ésa es mi opinión. No hay que mostrarse nunca delicado respecto al medio de escapar del destripamiento ni perder el tiempo tampoco buscando las razones de la persecución de que sea uno víctima. Al sabio le basta con escapar.

«¡Capitán! – le respondí con todo el convencimiento de voz de que era capaz en aquel momento-. ¡Qué extraordinario error iba usted a cometer! ¡Yo! ¿Cómo puede atribuirme, a mí, semejantes sentimientos pérfidos? ¡Es demasiada injusticia, la verdad! ¡Sólo de pensarlo me pongo enfermo! ¡Cómo! ¡Yo, que hace nada era aún defensor de nuestra querida patria! ¡Yo, que he mezclado mi sangre con la de usted durante años en innumerables batallas! ¡Qué injusticia iba a cometer conmigo, capitán!»

Después, dirigiéndome al grupo entero:

«¿Cómo han podido ustedes, señores, creer semejante maledicencia? ¡Llegar hasta el extremo de pensar que yo, hermano de ustedes, en resumidas cuentas, me empeñaba en propalar inmundas calumnias sobre oficiales heroicos! ¡Es el colmo! ¡El colmo, la verdad! ¡Y eso en el momento en que se aprestan, esos valientes, esos valientes incomparables, a reanudar la custodia sagrada de nuestro inmortal imperio colonial! – proseguí-. Allí donde los más magníficos soldados de nuestra raza se han cubierto de gloria eterna. ¡Los Mangin! ¡Los Faidherbe, los Gallieni!… ¡Ah, capitán! ¿Yo? ¿Una cosa así?»

Hice una pausa. Esperaba mostrarme conmovedor. Por fortuna, así fue por un instante. Entonces, sin perder tiempo, aprovechando el armisticio de la cháchara, fui derecho hacia él y le estreché las dos manos con emoción.

Con sus manos encerradas en las mías me sentía un poco más tranquilo. Sin soltarlas, seguí explicándome con locuacidad y, al tiempo que le daba mil veces la razón, le aseguraba que nuestras relaciones debían empezar de nuevo y esa vez sin equívocos. ¡Que mi natural y estupida timidez era la única causa de aquella fantástica confusión! Que, desde luego, mi conducta se podía haber interpretado como un inconcebible desdén hacia aquel grupo de pasajeros y pasajeras, «héroes y encantadores mezclados… Reunión providencial de grandes caracteres y talentos… Sin olvidar a las damas, intérpretes musicales incomparables, ¡ornato del barco!…». Al tiempo que pedía perdón profusamente, solicité, para acabar, que me admitieran, sin dilación ni restricción alguna, en su alegre grupo patriótico y fraterno… en el que, desde aquel momento y para siempre, deseaba ser amable compañía… Sin soltarle las manos, por supuesto, intensifiqué la elocuencia.

Mientras no mate, el militar es como un niño. Resulta fácil divertirlo. Como no está acostumbrado a pensar, en cuanto le hablas, se ve obligado, para intentar comprenderte, a hacer esfuerzos extenuantes. El capitán Frémizon no me mataba, no estaba bebiendo tampoco, no hacía nada con las manos, ni con los pies, tan sólo intentaba pensar. Eso era superior a sus posibilidades. En el fondo, yo lo tenía sujeto de la cabeza.

Gradualmente, mientras duraba aquella prueba de humillación, yo notaba que mi amor propio estaba listo para dejarme, esfumarse aún más y después soltarme, abandonarme del todo, por así decir, oficialmente.

Digan lo que digan, es un momento muy agradable. Después de ese incidente, me volví para siempre infinitamente libre y ligero, moralmente, claro está. Tal vez lo que más se necesite para salir de un apuro en la vida sea el miedo. Por mi parte, desde aquel día nunca he deseado otras armas ni otras virtudes.

Los compañeros del militar indeciso, que habían acudido también a propósito para enjugarme la sangre y jugar a las tabas con mis dientes desparramados, iban a contentarse con el único triunfo de atrapar las palabras en el aire. Los civiles, que habían acudido temblorosos ante el anuncio de una ejecución, tenían cara de pocos amigos. Como yo no sabía exactamente lo que decía, salvo que debía mantenerme a toda costa en el tono lírico, sin soltar las manos del capitán, miré fijamente a un punto ideal en la bruma esponjosa entre la que avanzaba el *Amiral-Bragueton* resoplando y escupiendo a cada impulso de la hélice. Por fin, me arriesgué, para concluir, a hacer girar uno de mis brazos por encima de mi cabeza y soltando una de las manos del capitán, una sola, me lancé a la perorata: «Entre bravos, señores oficiales, ¿no es lógico que acabemos entendiéndonos? ¡Viva Francia, entonces, qué hostia! ¡Viva Francia!» Era el truco del sargento Branledore. También en aquella ocasión dio resultado. Fue el único caso en que Francia me salvó la vida, hasta entonces había sido más bien lo contrario. Observé entre los oyentes un momentito de vacilación, pero, de todos modos, a un oficial, por poco predispuesto que esté, le resulta muy difícil abofetear a un civil, en público, en el momento en que grita tan fuerte como yo acababa de hacerlo: «¡Viva Francia!» Aquella vacilación me salvó.

Cogí dos brazos al azar en el grupo de oficiales e invité a todo el mundo a venir a ponerse las botas en el bar a mi salud y por nuestra reconciliación. Aquellos valientes no resistieron más de un minuto y a continuación bebimos durante dos horas. Sólo las hembras de a bordo nos seguían con los ojos, silenciosas y gradualmente decepcionadas. Por las ventanillas del bar, distinguía yo, entre otras, a la pianista, institutriz testaruda, que pasaba, la hiena, y volvía a pasar en medio de un círculo de pasajeras. Sospechaban, por supuesto, aquellos bichos, que me había escapado de la celada con astucia y se prometían atraparme con algún subterfugio. Entretanto, bebíamos sin cesar entre hombres bajo el inútil pero cansino ventilador, que desde las Canarias intentaba en vano desmigajar el tibio algodón atmosférico. Sin embargo, aún necesitaba yo hacer acopio de inspiración, facundia que pudiera agradar a mis nuevos amigos, la fácil. No cesaba, por miedo a equivocarme, en mi admiración patriótica y pedía una y mil veces a aquellos héroes, por turno, historias y más historias de bravura colonial. Son como los chistes verdes, las historias de bravura, siempre gustan a todos los militares de todos los países. Lo que hace falta, en el fondo, para llegar a una especie de paz con los hombres, oficiales o no, armisticios frágiles, desde luego, pero aun así preciosos, es permitirles en todas las circunstancias tenderse, repantigarse entre las jactancias necias. No hay vanidad inteligente. Es un instinto. Tampoco hay hombre que no sea ante todo vanidoso. El papel de panoli admirativo es prácticamente el único en que se toleran con algo de gusto los humanos. Con aquellos soldados no tenía que hacer excesos de imaginación. Bastaba con que no cesara de mostrarme maravillado. Es fácil pedir una y mil veces historias de guerra. Aquellos compañeros tenían historias a porrillo que contar. Parecía que estuviera de vuelta en los mejores momentos del hospital. Después de cada uno de sus relatos, no olvidaba de indicar mi aprobación, como me había enseñado Branledore, con una frase contundente: «¡Eso es lo que se llama una hermosa página de Historia!» No hay mejor fórmula. El círculo a que acababa de incorporarme tan furtivamente consideró que poco a poco me volvía interesante. Aquellos hombres se pusieron a contar, a propósito de la guerra, tantas trolas como las que en otro tiempo había escuchado yo y, más adelante, había contado, a mi vez, estando en competencia imaginativa con los compañeros del hospital. Sólo, que su ambiente era diferente y sus trolas se agitaban a través de las selvas congoleñas en lugar de en los Vosgos o en Flandes.

Mi capitán Frémizon, el que un instante antes se ofrecía para purificar el barco de mi pútrida presencia, después de haber probado mi forma de escuchar más atento que nadie, empezó a descubrir en mí mil cualidades excelentes. El flujo de sus arterias se veía como aligerado por el efecto de mis originales elogios, su visión se aclaraba, sus ojos estriados y sanguinolentos de alcohólico tenaz acabaron centelleando incluso a través de su embrutecimiento y las pocas dudas profundas que podía haber concebido sobre su propio valor, y que le pasaban por la cabeza aun en los momentos de profunda depresión, se esfumaron por un tiempo, adorablemente, por efecto maravilloso de mis inteligentes y oportunos comentarios.

Evidentemente, ¡yo era un creador de euforia! ¡Se daban palmadas con fuerza en los muslos de gusto! ¡No había nadie como yo para volver agradable la vida, pese a aquella humedad de agonía! Además, ¿es que no escuchaba de maravilla?

Mientras divagábamos así, el *Amiral-Bragueton* reducía aún más la marcha, se retrasaba en su propia salsa; ya no había ni un átomo de aire móvil a nuestro alrededor, debíamos costear y tan despacio, que parecíamos avanzar entre melaza. Melaza también el cielo por encima del barco, reducido ya a un emplasto negro y derretido que yo miraba de reojo y con envidia. Regresar a la noche era mi gran preferencia, aun sudando y gimiendo y, en fin, ¡en cualquier estado! Frémizon no acababa de contar sus historias. La tierra me parecía muy próxima, pero mi plan de escape me inspiraba mil inquietudes… Poco a poco, nuestro tema de conversación dejó de ser militar para volverse verde y después francamente marrano y, por último, tan deshilvanado, que ya no sabíamos cómo continuar; mis convidados renunciaron, uno tras otro, y se quedaron dormidos y roncando, sueño asqueroso que les raspaba las profundidades de la nariz. Aquél era el momento, o nunca, de desaparecer. No hay que dejar pasar esas treguas de crueldad que impone, pese a todo, la naturaleza a los organismos más viciosos y agresivos de este mundo.

En aquel momento estábamos anclados a muy poca distancia de la costa. Sólo se distinguían algunas luces

oscilantes a lo largo de la orilla.

Alrededor del barco vinieron a apretujarse en seguida cien piraguas temblorosas de negros chillones. Aquellos negros asaltaron todos los puentes para ofrecer sus servicios. En pocos segundos llevé hasta la escalera de desembarco mi equipaje preparado furtivamente y me lancé detrás de uno de aquellos barqueros, cuya obscuridad me ocultaba casi enteramente sus facciones y movimientos. Debajo de la pasarela y a ras del agua chapoteante, pregunté, inquieto, por nuestro destino.

«¿Dónde estamos?», le pregunté.

«¡En Bambola-Fort-Gono!», me respondió aquella sombra.

Empezamos a flotar libremente a grandes impulsos de remo. Lo ayudé para avanzar más rápido.

Aún tuve tiempo de distinguir una vez más, al escapar, a mis peligrosos compañeros de a bordo. A la luz de los faroles del entrepuente, vencidos al fin por el agotamiento y la gastritis, seguían fermentando y mascullando en sueños. Ahora, ahítos, tirados, se parecían todos, oficiales, funcionarios, ingenieros y tratantes, granulosos, barrigudos, oliváceos, revueltos, casi idénticos. Los perros, cuando duermen, se parecen a los lobos.

Toqué tierra pocos instantes después y me reuní con la noche, más densa aún bajo los árboles, y, detrás de ella, todas las complicidades del silencio.

En aquella colonia de la Bambola-Bragamance, por encima de todo el mundo sobresalía el gobernador. Sus militares y sus funcionarios apenas osaban respirar, cuando se dignaba mirar bajo el hombro a sus personas.

Muy por debajo aún de aquellos notables, los comerciantes instalados parecían robar y prosperar con mayor facilidad que en Europa. No había nuez de coco ni cacahuete, en todo el territorio, que escapara a su rapiña. Los funcionarios comprendían, a medida que llegaban a estar más cansados y enfermos, que se habían burlado de ellos bien, al mandarlos allí, para no darles otra cosa que galones y formularios que rellenar y casi nada de pasta con ellos. Así se les iban los ojos de envidia tras los comerciantes. El elemento militar, todavía más embrutecido que los otros dos, se alimentaba de gloria colonial y, para mejor tragarla, mucha quinina y kilómetros de reglamentos.

Todo el mundo se volvía, como es fácil de comprender, a fuerza de esperar que el termómetro bajara, cada vez más cabrón. Y las hostilidades particulares y colectivas, interminables y descabelladas, se eternizaban entre los militares y la administración, entre ésta y los comerciantes, entre éstos, aliados momentáneos, y aquéllos y también de todos contra el negro y, por último, entre negros. Así, las escasas energías que escapaban al paludismo, a la sed, al sol, se consumían en odios tan feroces, tan insistentes, que muchos colonos acababan muriéndose allí a consecuencia de ellos, autoenvenenados, como escorpiones.

No obstante, aquella anarquía muy virulenta se encontraba encerrada en un marco de policía hermético, como los cangrejos dentro de un cesto. Se jodían pero bien, y en vano, los funcionarios; el gobernador encontraba para reclutar, a fin de mantener la obediencia en su colonia, a todos los milicianos míseros que necesitaba, negros endeudados a quienes la miseria expulsaba por millares hacia la costa, vencidos por el comercio, en busca de un rancho. A aquellos reclutas les enseñaban el derecho y la forma de admirar al gobernador. Éste parecía pasear sobre su uniforme todo el oro de sus finanzas y, con el sol encima, era como para verlo y no creerlo, sin contar las plumas.

Todos los años se marcaba un viajecito a Vichy, el gobernador, y sólo leía el *Boletín Oficial del Estado*. Numerosos funcionarios habían vivido con la esperanza de que un día se acostara con su mujer, pero al gobernador no le gustaban las mujeres. No le gustaba nada. Sobrevivía a cada nueva epidemia de fiebre amarilla como por encanto, mientras que tantas de las gentes que deseaban enterrarlo la diñaban como moscas a la primera pestilencia.

Recordaban que cierto «Catorce de Julio», cuando pasaba revista a las tropas de la Residencia, caracoleando entre los espahíes de su guardia, en solitario delante de una bandera así de grande, cierto sargento, seguramente exaltado por la fiebre, se arrojó delante de su caballo para gritarle: «¡Atrás, cornudo!» Al parecer, quedó muy afectado, el gobernador, por aquella especie de atentado, que, por cierto, quedó sin explicación.

Resulta difícil mirar en conciencia a la gente y las cosas de los trópicos por los colores que de ellas emanan. Están en embullición, los colores y las cosas. Una latita de sardinas abierta en pleno mediodía sobre la calzada proyecta tantos reflejos diversos, que adquiere ante los ojos la importancia de un accidente. Hay que tener cuidado. No sólo son histéricos los hombres allí, las cosas también. La vida no llega a ser tolerable apenas hasta la caída de la noche, pero, aun así, la obscuridad se ve acaparada casi al instante por los mosquitos en enjambres. No uno, dos, ni cien, sino billones. Salir adelante en esas condiciones llega a ser una auténtica obra de preservación. Carnaval de día, espumadera de noche, la guerra a la chita callando.

Cuando en la cabaña a la que te retiras, y que parece casi propicia, reina por fin el silencio, las termitas vienen a asediarla, ocupadas como están eternamente, las muy inmundas, en comerte los montantes de la cabaña. Como el tornado embista entonces ese encaje traicionero, las calles enteras quedan vaporizadas.

La ciudad de Fort-Gono, donde yo había ido a parar, aparecía así, precaria capital de Bragamance, entre el mar y la selva, pero provista, adornada, sin embargo, con todos los bancos, burdeles, cafés, terrazas que hacen falta e incluso un banderín de enganche, para constituir una pequeña metrópoli, sin olvidar la Place Faidherbe y el Boulevard Bugeaud, para el paseo, conjunto de caserones rutilantes en medio de acantilados rugosos, rellenos de larvas y pateados por generaciones de cabritos de la guarnición y administradores espabilados.

El elemento militar, hacia las cinco, refunfuñaba en torno a los aperitivos, licores cuyo precio, en el momento en que yo llegaba, acababan de aumentar precisamente. Una delegación de clientes iba a solicitar al gobernador una disposición oficial que prohibiera a las tabernas hacer de su capa un sayo con los precios corrientes del ajenjo y el casis. De creer a algunos parroquianos, nuestra colonización se volvía cada vez más ardua por culpa del hielo. La introducción del hielo en las colonias, está demostrado, había sido la señal de la desvirilización del colonizador. En adelante, soldado a su helado aperitivo por la costumbre, iba a renunciar, el colonizador, a dominar el clima mediante su estoicismo exclusivamente. Los Faidherbe, los Stanley, los Marchand, observémoslo de pasada, no se quejaron nunca de la cerveza, el vino y el agua tibia y cenagosa que bebieron durante años. No hay otra explicación. Así se pierden las colonias.

Me enteré de muchas otras cosas al abrigo de las palmeras que, en cambio, prosperaban con savia provocante a lo largo de aquellas calles de viviendas frágiles. Sólo aquella crudeza de verdor inusitado impedía al lugar parecerse enteramente a la Garenne-Bezons.

Al llegar la noche, se producía un hervidero de indígenas que hacían la carrera entre las nubéculas de mosquitos miserables y atiborrados de fiebre amarilla. Un refuerzo de elementos sudaneses ofrecía al paseante todo lo mejor que guardaban bajo los taparrabos. Por precios muy razonables te podías cepillar a una familia entera durante una hora o dos. A mí me habría gustado andar de sexo en sexo, pero por fuerza tuve que decidirme a buscar un lugar donde me dieran currelo.

El director de la Compañía Porduriére del Pequeño Congo buscaba, según me aseguraron, a un empleado principiante para regentar una de sus factorías en la selva. Acudí sin tardar a ofrecerle mis incompetentes pero solícitos servicios. No fue una recepción calurosa la que me reservó el director. Aquel maníaco -hay que llamarlo por su nombre- habitaba, no lejos del Gobierno, un pabellón especial, construido con madera y paja. Antes de haberme mirado siquiera, me hizo algunas preguntas muy brutales sobre mi pasado; después, un poco calmado por mis respuestas de lo más ingenuas, su desprecio hacia mí tomó un cariz bastante indulgente. Sin embargo, aún no consideró conveniente pedirme que me sentara.

«Según sus documentos, sabe usted un poco de medicina», observó.

Le respondí que, en efecto, había hecho algunos estudios en esa materia.

«Entonces, ¡le servirán! – dijo-. ¿Quiere whisky?»

Yo no bebía. «¿Quiere fumar?» También lo rechacé. Aquella abstinencia lo sorprendió. Puso mala cara incluso.

«No me gustan nada los empleados que no beben ni fuman… ¿No será usted pederasta por casualidad?… ¿No? ¡Lástima!… Ésos nos roban menos que los otros… La experiencia me lo ha enseñado… Se encariñan… En fin -tuvo a bien retractarse-, en general me ha parecido notar esa cualidad de los pederastas, a su favor… ¡Tal vez usted nos demuestre lo contrario!… -Y a renglón seguido-: Tiene usted calor, ¿eh? ¡Ya se acostumbrará! De todos modos, ¡no le quedará más remedio que acostumbrarse! Y el viaje, ¿qué tal?»

«¡Desagradable!», le respondí.

«Pues, mire, amigo, eso no es nada, ya verá lo que es bueno, cuando haya pasado un año en Bikomimbo, donde lo voy a enviar para substituir a ese otro farsante…»

Su negra, en cuclillas cerca de la mesa, se hurgaba los pies y se limpiaba las uñas con una astillita.

«¡Vete de aquí, aborto! – le espetó su amo-. ¡Vete a buscar al *boy*\ ¡Y hielo también!»

El *boy* solicitado llegó muy despacio. Entonces el director se levantó como un resorte, irritado, y recibió al *boy* con un tremendo par de sonoras bofetadas y dos patadas en el bajo vientre.

«Esta gente me va a matar, ¡ya ve usted! – predijo el director, al tiempo que suspiraba. Se dejó caer de nuevo en su sillón, cubierto de telas amarillas sucias y dadas de sí-. Hágame el favor, amigo -dijo de repente en tono amable y familiar, como desahogado por un rato con la brutalidad que acababa de cometer-, páseme la fusta y la quinina… ahí, sobre la mesa… No debería excitarme así… Es absurdo dejarse llevar por el temperamento…»

Desde su casa dominábamos el puerto fluvial, que relucía por entre un polvo tan denso, tan compacto, que se oían los sonidos de su caótica actividad mejor de lo que se distinguían los detalles. Filas de negros, en la orilla, trajinaban bajo el látigo descargando, bodega tras bodega, los barcos nunca vacíos, subiendo por pasarelas temblorosas y estrechas, con sus grandes cestos llenos a la cabeza, en equilibrio, entre injurias, como hormigas verticales.

Iban y venían, formando rosarios irregulares, por entre un vaho escarlata. Algunas de aquellas formas laboriosas llevaban, además, un puntito negro a la espalda, eran las madres, que acudían a currar como burras, también ellas, cargando sacos de palmitos con el hijo a cuestas, un fardo más. Me pregunto si las hormigas podrán hacer igual.

«¿Verdad que siempre parece domingo aquí?… -prosiguió en broma el director-. ¡Es alegre! ¡Y lleno de color! Las hembras siempre en cueros. ¿Se ha fijado? Y hembras hermosas, ¿eh? Parece extraño, cuando se llega de París, ¿verdad? Y nosotros, ¿qué le parece? ¡Siempre con dril blanco! Ya ve usted, ¡como en los baños de mar! ¿Verdad que estamos guapos así? ¡Como para la primera comunión, vamos! Aquí siempre es fiesta, ¡ya le digo! ¡El día de la Asunción! ¡Y así hasta el Sahara! ¡Imagínese!»

Y después dejaba de hablar, suspiraba, refunfuñaba, volvía a repetir dos, tres veces «¡Me cago en la leche!», se enjugaba la frente y reanudaba la conversación.

«Adonde lo envía a usted la Compañía es en plena selva, es húmedo… Queda a diez jornadas de aquí… Primero el mar… Y luego el río. Un río muy rojo, ya verá… Y al otro lado están los españoles… Aquel a quien va usted a substituir en esa factoría es un perfecto cabrón, sépalo… En confianza… Se lo digo… ¡No hay manera de que nos envíe las cuentas, ese sinvergüenza! ¡No hay manera! ¡De nada sirve que le mande avisos y más avisos!… ¡No le dura mucho la honradez al hombre, cuando está solo!… ¡Quia! ¡Ya verá!… ¡Ya lo verá también usted!… Que está enfermo, nos escribe… ¡No lo dudo! ¡Enfermo! ¡También yo estoy enfermo! ¿Qué quiere decir eso? ¡Todos estamos enfermos! También usted estará enfermo y dentro de muy poco, además. ¡Eso no es una razón! ¡Nos la trae floja que esté enfermo!… ¡La Compañía ante todo! Cuando llegue usted allí, ¡haga el inventario lo primero!… Hay víveres para tres meses en esa factoría y mercancías al menos para un año… ¡No le faltará de nada!… Sobre todo no salga usted de noche… ¡Desconfíe! Los negros que él le envíe para recogerlo en el mar puede que lo tiren al agua. ¡Ha debido de enseñarles! ¡Son tan pillos como él! ¡No me cabe duda! ¡Ha debido de hablarles de usted!… ¡Eso es corriente aquí! Conque coja su propia quinina, antes de marcharse… ¡Es capaz de haber puesto algo en la de él!»

El director se cansó de darme consejos, se levantó para despedirme. El techo de chapa parecía pesar dos mil toneladas por lo menos, de tanto calor como acumulaba la chapa. Los dos poníamos mala cara por el calor. Era como para diñarla al instante. Añadió:

«¡Tal vez no valga la pena que nos volvamos a ver antes de su marcha, Bardamu! ¡Aquí todo cansa! En fin, ¡quizá vaya, de todos modos, a verlo a los cobertizos antes de su partida!… Le escribiremos, cuando esté usted allí… Hay un correo al mes… Sale de aquí, el correo, conque, ¡buena suerte!…»

Y desapareció en su sombra entre el casco y la chaqueta. Se le veían con toda claridad los tendones del cuello, por detrás, arqueados como dos dedos contra su cabeza. Se volvió otra vez:

«¡Dígale a ese otro punto que vuelva aquí a toda prisa!… ¡Que tengo que hablar con él!… ¡Que no se entretenga por el camino! ¡El muy canalla! ¡Espero que no casque por el camino!… ¡Sería una lástima! ¡Una verdadera lástima! ¡Menudo sinvergüenza!»

Un criado negro me precedía con un gran farol para llevarme al lugar donde debía alojarme hasta mi salida para ese interesante Bikomimbo prometido.

Íbamos por avenidas donde todo el mundo parecía haber bajado a pasear tras el crepúsculo. La noche, resonante de gongs, nos envolvía, entrecortada por cantos apagados e incoherentes como el hipo, la gran noche negra de los países cálidos con su brutal corazón en tam-tam, que siempre late demasiado aprisa.

Mi joven guía caminaba rápido y ágil con los pies descalzos. Debía de haber europeos por la espesura, se los oía por allí, paseándose, con sus voces de blancos, perfectamente reconocibles, agresivas, falsas. Los murciélagos no cesaban de venir a revolotear, de surcar el aire entre los enjambres de insectos que nuestra luz atraía a nuestro paso. Bajo cada hoja de árbol debía de esconderse un grillo al menos, a juzgar por el alboroto ensordecedor que hacían todos juntos.

Un grupo de tiradores indígenas, que discutían junto a un ataúd colocado en el suelo y recubierto con una gran bandera tricolor y ondulante, nos hizo detener en el cruce de dos caminos, a media altura de una elevación.

Era un muerto del hospital que no sabían dónde enterrar. Las órdenes eran imprecisas. Unos querían enterrarlo en uno de los campos de abajo, los otros insistían en hacerlo en un enclave en lo alto de la cuesta. Había que decidirse. Así el *boy* y yo tuvimos que dar nuestra opinión sobre el asunto.

Por fin, optaron, los porteadores, por el cementerio de abajo, en lugar del de arriba, por la bajada. También encontramos por el camino a tres jovencitos blancos de la raza de los que frecuentan los domingos los partidos de rugby en Europa, espectadores apasionados, agresivos y paliduchos. Allí pertenecían, empleados como yo, a la Sociedad Porduriére y me indicaron con toda amabilidad el camino de aquella casa inacabada donde se encontraba, de momento, mi cama desmontable y portátil.

Allí nos dirigimos. La construcción estaba del todo vacía, salvo algunos utensilios de cocina y mi cama, por llamarla de algún modo. En cuanto me hube tumbado sobre aquel chisme filiforme y tembloroso, veinte murciélagos salieron de los rincones y se lanzaron en idas y venidas zumbantes, como salvas de abanico, por encima de mi aprensivo reposo.

El negrito, mi guía, volvía sobre sus pasos para ofrecerme sus servicios íntimos y, como yo no estaba animado aquella noche, se ofreció, al instante, desilusionado, a presentarme a su hermana. Me habría gustado saber cómo habría podido encontrarla, a su hermana, en semejante noche.

El tam-tam de la aldea cercana te hacía saltar la paciencia, cortada en pedacitos menudos. Mil mosquitos diligentes tomaron sin tardar posesión de mis muslos y, aun así, no me atreví a volver a poner los pies en el suelo por los escorpiones y las serpientes venenosas, cuya abominable caza suponía iniciada. Tenían para escoger, las serpientes, en materia de ratas, las oía roer, a las ratas, todo lo imaginable, en la pared, en el suelo, trémulas, en el techo.

Por fin, salió la luna y hubo un poco más de calma en la habitación. En resumen, en las colonias no se estaba bien.

De todos modos, llegó la mañana, una caldera. Fui presa, en cuerpo y espíritu, de unas ganas tremendas de volverme a Europa. Sólo me faltaba el dinero para largarme. Con eso basta. Por otra parte, sólo me quedaba por pasar una semana en Fort-Gono antes de ir a incorporarme a mi puesto, en Bikomimbo, de tan agradable descripción.

El edificio más grande de Fort-Gono, después del palacio del gobernador, era el hospital. Me lo encontraba siempre por el camino; no hacía cien metros en la ciudad sin toparme con uno de sus pabellones, que apestaban desde lejos a ácido fénico. De vez en cuando me aventuraba hasta los muelles de embarque para ver trabajar a mis anémicos colegas que la Compañía Porduriére se procuraba en Francia por patronatos enteros. Parecían ser presa de una prisa belicosa, al no cesar de descargar y recargar cargueros, unos tras otros. «¡Cuesta tanto la estancia de un carguero en el puerto!», repetían, sinceramente preocupados, como si se tratara de su dinero.

Chinchaban a los descargadores negros con frenesí. Celosos cumplidores de su deber eran, sin lugar a dudas, e igual de cobardes y aviesos. Empleados modélicos, en una palabra, bien elegidos, de una inconsciencia y un entusiasmo asombrosos. Un hijo así le habría encantado tener a mi madre, devoto de los patronos, uno para ella sola, del que pudiera estar orgullosa delante de todo el mundo, hijo del todo legítimo.

Habían acudido al África tropical, aquellos pobres abortos, a ofrecerles su carne, a los patronos, su sangre, sus vidas, su juventud, mártires por veintidós francos al día (menos las deducciones), contentos, pese a todo contentos, hasta el último glóbulo rojo acechado por el diezmillonésimo mosquito.

La colonia los hace hincharse o adelgazar, a los empleadillos, pero los conserva; sólo existen dos caminos para cascar bajo el sol, el de la gordura o el de la delgadez. No hay otro. Se podría elegir, si no fuera porque depende de la naturaleza de cada cual, palmarla grueso o reducido a piel y huesos.

El director, allí arriba, en el acantilado rojo, que se agitaba, diabólico, con su negra, bajo el techo de chapa de diez mil kilos de sol, no iba a escapar tampoco al plazo fijado. Era del tipo flaco. Tan sólo se debatía. Parecía dominar el clima. ¡Pura apariencia! En realidad, se desmoronaba aún más que los otros.

Según decían, tenía un plan de estafa magnífico para hacer fortuna en dos años… Pero no iba a tener tiempo de realizar su plan, aun cuando se dedicara a defraudar a la Compañía noche y día. Veintidós directores habían intentado ya antes que él hacer fortuna, todos con su plan, como en la ruleta. Todo aquello lo sabían los accionistas, que lo espiaban desde allí, desde más arriba aún, desde la Rué Moncey de París, al director, y los hacía sonreír. Todo aquello era infantil. Lo sabían de sobra, los accionistas, también ellos, más bandidos que nadie, que estaba sifilítico su director y muy castigado por los trópicos y que tragaba quinina y bismuto como para reventarse los tímpanos y arsénico como para quedarse sin una encía.

En la contabilidad general de la Compañía, los días del director estaban contados, como los meses de un cerdo.

Mis colegas no intercambiaban la menor idea entre sí. Sólo fórmulas, fijas, fritas y refritas como cuscurros de pensamientos. «¡No hay que apurarse! – decían-. ¡Les vamos a dar para el pelo!…» «¡El delegado general es un cornudo!…» «¡Con la piel de los negros hay que hacer petacas!», etc.

Por la noche, nos encontrábamos para el aperitivo, tras haber acabado las últimas faenas, con un agente auxiliar de la Administración, el Sr. Tandernot, así se llamaba, originario de La Rochelle. Si se juntaba con los comerciantes, Tandernot, era para que le pagaran el aperitivo.

No quedaba más remedio. Decadencia. No tenía un céntimo. Su puesto era el más bajo posible de la jerarquía colonial. Su función consistía en dirigir la construcción de carreteras en plena selva. Los indígenas trabajaban en ellas bajo el látigo de sus milicianos, evidentemente. Pero como ningún blanco pasaba nunca por las carreteras nuevas que hacía Tandernot y, por otra parte, los negros preferían sus senderos de la selva para que los descubrieran lo menos posible, por miedo a los impuestos, y como, en el fondo, no llevaban a ninguna parte, las carreteras de la Administración, obra de Tandernot, pues… desaparecían muy rápido bajo la vegetación, en realidad de un mes para otro, para ser exactos.

«¡El año pasado perdí 122 kilómetros! – nos recordaba de buena gana aquel pionero fantástico a propósito de sus carreteras-. ¡Aunque no lo crean!…»

Sólo le conocí, durante mi estancia, una fanfarronada, humilde vanidad, a Tandernot, la de ser, él, el único europeo que podía pescar catarros en Bragamance con 44 grados a la sombra… Aquella originalidad lo consolaba de muchas cosas… «¡Ya me he vuelto a constipar como un gilipollas! – anunciaba con bastante orgullo a la hora del aperitivo-. ¡Esto sólo me ocurre a mí!» Entonces los miembros de nuestra enclenque cuadrilla exclamaban: «¡Jolines! ¡Qué tío, este Tandernot!» Era mejor que nada, semejante satisfacción. Cualquier cosa, en materia de vanidad, es mejor que nada.

Una de las otras distracciones del grupo de los modestos asalariados de la Compañía Porduriére consistía en organizar concursos de fiebre. No era difícil, pero nos pasábamos días desafiándonos, lo que servía para

matar el tiempo. Al llegar el atardecer y con él la fiebre, casi siempre cotidiana, nos medíamos. «¡Toma ya! ¡Treinta y nueve!…» «Pero, bueno, ¿y qué? ¡Si yo llego a cuarenta como si nada!»

Por lo demás, aquellos resultados eran del todo exactos y regulares. A la luz de los fotóforos, nos comparábamos los termómetros. El vencedor triunfaba temblando. «¡Transpiro tanto, que ya no puedo mear!», observaba fielmente el más demacrado de nosotros, un colega flaco, de Ariége, campeón de la febrilidad, que había ido allí, según me confió, para escapar del seminario, donde «no tenía bastante libertad». Pero el tiempo pasaba y ni unos ni otros de aquellos compañeros podían decirme a qué clase de original pertenecía exactamente el individuo al que yo iba a substituir en Bikomimbo.

«¡Es un tipo curioso!», me advertían y se acabó.

«Al llegar a la colonia -me aconsejaba el chaval de Ariége, el de la fiebre alta- ¡tienes que hacerte valer! ¡O todo o nada! ¡Serás para el director un tío cojonudo o una mierda de tío! Y, fíjate bien en lo que te digo: ¡te juzgan en seguida!»

En lo que a mí respectaba, tenía mucho miedo de que me clasificaran entre los «mierda de tío» o peor aún.

Aquellos jóvenes negreros, mis amigos, me llevaron a visitar a otro colega de la Compañía Porduriére, que vale la pena recordar de modo especial en este relato. Regentaba un establecimiento en el centro del barrio de los europeos y, enmohecido de fatiga, puro carcamal, churretoso, temía a cualquier clase de luz por sus ojos, que dos años de cocción ininterrumpida bajo las chapas onduladas habían dejado atrozmente secos. Necesitaba, según decía, una buena media hora por la mañana para abrirlos y otra media hora hasta poder ver un poquito con ellos. Todo rayo luminoso lo hería. Un topo enorme era y muy sarnoso.

Asfixiarse y sufrir habían llegado a ser para él como una segunda naturaleza y robar también. Habría quedado bien desamparado, si hubiera recuperado de repente la salud y la honradez. Su odio hacia el delegado general me parece aún hoy, a tanta distancia, una de las pasiones más vivas que he tenido oportunidad de observar nunca en un hombre. Al acordarse de él, era presa de una rabia asombrosa, pese a sus dolores, y a la menor ocasión se ponía de lo más furioso, sin dejar de rascarse, por cierto, de arriba abajo.

No cesaba de rascarse por todo el cuerpo, giratoriamente, por así decir, desde la extremidad de la columna vertebral al nacimiento del cuello. Se surcaba la epidermis e incluso la dermis con rayas de uñas sangrantes, sin por ello dejar de despachar a los clientes, numerosos, negros casi siempre, más o menos desnudos.

Con la mano libre, hurgaba entonces, solícito, en diferentes escondrijos y a derecha e izquierda en la tenebrosa tienda. Sacaba sin equivocarse nunca, con habilidad y presteza asombrosas, la cantidad exacta que necesitaba el parroquiano de tabaco en hojas hediondas, cerillas húmedas, latas de sardinas y grandes cucharadas de melaza, de cerveza superalcohólica en botellas trucadas, que dejaba caer bruscamente, si volvía a ser presa del frenesí de rascarse, por ejemplo, en las profundidades del pantalón. Entonces hundía el brazo entero, que no tardaba en salir por la bragueta, siempre entreabierta por precaución.

Aquella enfermedad que le roía la piel la designaba con un nombre local, «corocoro». «¡Esta cabronada de "corocoro"!… Cuando pienso que ese cerdo del director no ha pescado aún el "corocoro" -decía enfurecido-. ¡Me duele aún más el vientre!… ¡Está inmunizado contra el "corocoro"!… Está demasiado podrido. No es un hombre, ese chulo, ¡es una infección!… ¡Una puta mierda!…»

Al instante toda la asamblea estallaba en carcajadas y los negros clientes también, por emulación. Nos espantaba un poco, aquel compañero. Aun así, tenía un amigo; era un pobre tipo asmático *y* canoso que conducía un camión para la Compañía Porduriére. Siempre nos traía hielo, robado, evidentemente, por aquí, por allá, en los barcos del muelle.

Bebimos a su salud en la barra en medio de los clientes negros, que babeaban de envidia. Los clientes eran indígenas bastante despiertos como para acercarse a nosotros, los blancos; en una palabra, una selección. Los otros negros, menos avispados, preferían permanecer a distancia. El instinto. Pero los más espabilados, los más contaminados, se convertían en dependientes de tiendas. En éstas se los reconocía porque ponían de vuelta y media a los otros negros. El colega del «corocoro» compraba caucho en bruto, que le traían de la selva, en sacos, en bolas húmedas.

Estando allí, sin cansarnos nunca de escucharlo, una familia de recogedores de caucho, tímida, se quedó parada en el umbral. El padre delante de los demás, arrugado, con un pequeño taparrabos naranja y el largo machete en la mano.

No se atrevía a entrar, el salvaje. Sin embargo, uno de los dependientes indígenas lo invitaba: «¡Ven, moreno! ¡Ven a ver aquí! ¡Nosotros no comer salvajes!» Aquellas palabras acabaron decidiéndolos. Penetraron en aquel horno, en cuyo fondo echaba pestes nuestro hombre del «corocoro».

Al parecer, aquel negro nunca había visto una tienda, ni blancos tal vez. Una de sus mujeres lo seguía, con los ojos bajos, llevando a la cabeza, en equilibrio, el enorme cesto lleno de caucho en bruto.

Los dependientes se apoderaron, imperiosos, del cesto para pesar su contenido en la báscula. El salvaje comprendía tan poco lo de la báscula como lo demás. La mujer seguía sin atreverse a alzar la vista. Los otros negros de la familia los esperaban fuera, con ojos como platos. Los hicieron entrar también, a todos, incluidos los niños, para que no se perdiesen nada del espectáculo.

Era la primera vez que acudían todos así, juntos, desde el bosque hasta la ciudad de los blancos. Debían de haber pasado mucho tiempo, unos y otros, para recoger todo aquel caucho. Conque, por fuerza, el resultado a todos interesaba. Tarda en rezumar, el caucho, en los cubiletes colgados del tronco de los árboles. Muchas veces un vasito no acaba de llenarse en dos meses.

Pesado el cesto, nuestro rascador se llevó al padre, atónito, tras su mostrador y con un lápiz le hizo su cuenta y después le puso en la palma de la mano unas monedas y se la cerró. Y luego: «¡Vete! – le dijo, como si nada-. ¡Ahí tienes tu cuenta!…»

Todos los amigos blancos se tronchaban de risa, ante lo bien que había dirigido su *business.* El negro seguía plantado y corrido ante el mostrador con su calzón naranja en torno al sexo.

«¿Tú no saber dinero? ¿Salvaje, entonces? – le gritó para despertarlo uno de nuestros dependientes, listillo habituado y bien adiestrado seguramente para aquellas transacciones perentorias-. Tú no hablar "fransé", ¿eh? Tú gorila aún, ¿eh?… Tú, ¿hablar qué? ¿Eh? ¿Kous-Kous? ¿Mabillia? ¿Tú tonto el culo? ¡Bushman! ¡Tonto lo' cojone'!»

Pero seguía delante de nosotros, el salvaje, con las monedas dentro de la mano cerrada. Se habría largado corriendo, si se hubiera atrevido, pero no se atrevía.

«Tú, ¿comprar qué ahora con la pasta? – intervino oportuno, el "rascador"-. La verdad es que hacía mucho que no veía a uno tan gilipollas -tuvo a bien observar-. ¡Debe de venir de lejos éste! ¿Qué quieres? ¡Dame esa pasta!»

Le volvió a coger el dinero, imperioso, y en lugar de las monedas le arrebujó en la mano un gran pañuelo muy grande que había ido a sacar, raudo, de un escondrijo del mostrador.

El viejo negro no se decidía a marcharse con su pañuelo. Entonces el «rascador» hizo algo mejor. Evidentemente, conocía todos los trucos del comercio invasor. Agitando ante los ojos de uno de los negritos el gran pedazo verde de estameña: «¿No te parece bonito? ¿Eh, mocoso? ¿Nunca has visto pañuelos así? ¿Eh, monín? ¡Di, granujilla!» Y se lo anudó en torno al cuello, imperioso, para vestirlo.

La familia salvaje contemplaba ahora al pequeño adornado con aquella gran pieza de algodón verde… Ya no había nada que hacer, puesto que el pañuelo acababa de entrar en la familia. Sólo cabía aceptarlo, tomarlo y marcharse.

Conque todos se pusieron a retroceder despacio, cruzaron la puerta y, en el momento en que el padre se volvía, el último, para decir algo, el dependiente más espabilado, que llevaba zapatos, lo estimuló, al padre, con un patadón en pleno trasero.

Toda la pequeña tribu, reagrupada, silenciosa, al otro lado de la Avenue Faidherbe, bajo la magnolia, nos miró acabar nuestro aperitivo. Parecía que estuvieran intentando comprender lo que acababa de ocurrirles.

Era el hombre del «corocoro» quien nos invitaba. Incluso nos puso su fonógrafo. Había de todo en su tienda. Me recordaba los convoyes de la guerra.

Conque al servicio de la Compañía Porduriére del Pequeño Togo trabajaban, al mismo tiempo que yo, ya lo he dicho, en sus cobertizos y plantaciones, gran número de negros y pobres blancos de mi estilo. Los indígenas, por su parte, no funcionan sino a estacazos, conservan esa dignidad, mientras que los blancos, perfeccionados por la instrucción pública, andan solos.

La estaca acaba cansando a quien la maneja, mientras que la esperanza de llegar a ser poderoso y rico con que están atiborrados los blancos no cuesta nada, absolutamente nada. ¡Que no vengan a alabarnos el mérito de Egipto y de los tiranos tártaros! Estos aficionados antiguos no eran sino unos maletas petulantes en el supremo arte de hacer rendir al animal vertical su mayor esfuerzo en el currelo. No sabían, aquellos primitivos, llamar «Señor» al esclavo, ni hacerle votar de vez en cuando, ni pagarle el jornal, ni, sobre todo, llevarlo a la guerra, para liberarlo de sus pasiones. Un cristiano de veinte siglos, algo sabía yo al respecto, no puede contenerse cuando por delante de él acierta a pasar un regimiento. Le inspira demasiadas ideas.

Por eso, en lo que a mí respectaba, decidí andarme con mucho ojito y, además, aprender a callarme escrupulosamente, a ocultar mi deseo de largarme, a prosperar, por último, de ser posible y pese a todo, gracias a la Compañía Porduriére. No había ni un minuto que perder.

A lo largo de los cobertizos, al ras de las orillas cenagosas, pululaban, solapadas y permanentes, bandas de cocodrilos al acecho. Por ser del género metálico, gozaban con aquel calor hasta el delirio; los negros, también, al parecer.

En pleno mediodía, era como para preguntarse si era posible, toda la agitación de aquellas masas menesterosas a lo largo de los muelles, aquel alboroto de negros superexcitados y gaznápiros.

Para ejercitarme en la numeración de los sacos, antes de partir para la selva, tuve que entrenarme con la asfixia progresiva en el cobertizo central de la Compañía con los demás empleados, entre dos grandes básculas, encajonadas en medio de la multitud alcalina de negros harapientos, pustulosos y cantarines. Cada cual arrastraba tras sí su nubécula de polvo, que sacudía cadenciosamente. Los golpes sordos de los encargados del transporte se abatían sobre aquellas espaldas magníficas, sin provocar protestas ni quejas. Una pasividad de lelos. El dolor soportado con tanta sencillez como el tórrido aire de aquel horno polvoriento.

El director pasaba de vez en cuando, siempre agresivo, para asegurarse de que yo hacía progresos reales en la técnica de la numeración y del peso trucado.

Se abría paso hasta las básculas, por entre la marejada indígena, a estacazos. «Bardamu -me dijo, una mañana que estaba locuaz-, ve usted esos negros que nos rodean, ¿no?… Bueno, pues, cuando yo llegué al Pequeño Togo, pronto hará treinta años, ¡aún vivían sólo de la caza, la pesca y las matanzas entre tribus, los muy cochinos!… En mis comienzos de pequeño comerciante, los vi, como le digo, volver tras la victoria a su aldea, cargados con más de cien cestos de carne humana, chorreando sangre, ¡para darse una zampada!… ¿Me oye, Bardamu?… ¡Chorreando sangre! ¡La de sus enemigos! ¡Imagínese el banquete!… ¡Hoy ya no hay más

victorias! ¡Estamos aquí nosotros! ¡Ni tribus! ¡Ni alboroto! ¡Ni faroladas! ¡Tan sólo mano de obra y cacahuetes! ¡A currelar! ¡Se acabó la caza! ¡Y los fusiles! ¡Cacahuetes y caucho!… ¡Para pagar el impuesto! ¡El impuesto para que nos traigan más caucho y cacahuetes! ¡Así es la vida, Bardamu! ¡Cacahuetes! ¡Cacahuetes y caucho!… Y, además… ¡Hombre! Precisamente ahí viene el general Tombat.»

Venía, en efecto, a nuestro encuentro, el general, un viejo a punto de desplomarse bajo el enorme peso del sol.

Ya no era del todo militar, el general; sin embargo, tampoco civil aún. Era confidente de la Porduriére y servía de enlace entre la Administración y el Comercio. Enlace indispensable, aunque esos dos elementos estuvieran siempre en estado de competencia y hostilidad permanente. Pero el general Tombat maniobraba admirablemente. Acababa de salir, entre otros, de un reciente negocio sucio de venta de bienes enemigos, que en las alturas consideraban sin solución.

Al comienzo de la guerra, le habían rajado un poco la oreja, al general Tombat, lo justo para quedar disponible con honor, después de Charleroi. En seguida la había puesto al servicio de «la más grande Francia», su disponibilidad. Sin embargo, Verdún, que pertenecía a un pasado muy lejano, seguía preocupándole. Enseñaba, en la mano, radiotelegramas. «¡Van a resistir, nuestros soldaditos valientes! ¡Están resistiendo!…» Hacía tanto calor en el cobertizo y estábamos tan lejos de Francia, que dispensábamos al general Tombat de hacer otros pronósticos. De todos modos, repetimos en coro, por cortesía, y el director con nosotros: «¡Son admirables!», y, tras esas palabras, Tombat nos dejó.

Unos instantes después, el director se abrió otro camino violento entre los apretujados torsos y desapareció, a su vez, en el polvo de pimienta.

Aquel hombre, de ojos ardientes como carbones y consumido por la pasión de poseer la Compañía, me espantaba un poco. Me costaba acostumbrarme a su simple presencia. No habría imaginado que existiera en el mundo una osamenta humana capaz de aquella tensión máxima de codicia. Casi nunca nos hablaba en voz alta, sólo con medias palabras; daba la impresión de que no vivía, no pensaba sino para conspirar, espiar, traicionar con pasión. Contaban que robaba, falseaba, escamoteaba, él solo, más que todos los demás empleados juntos, nada holgazanes, por cierto, puedo asegurarlo. Pero no me cuesta creerlo.

Mientras duró mi período de prácticas en Fort-Gono, aún tenía ratos libres para pasearme por aquella ciudad, por llamarla de algún modo, donde, estaba visto, sólo encontraba un lugar de verdad deseable: el hospital.

Cuando llegas a alguna parte, te aparecen ambiciones. Yo tenía la vocación de enfermo y nada más. Cada cual es como es. Me paseaba en torno a aquellos pabellones hospitalarios y prometedores, dolientes, retirados, protegidos y no podía alejarme de ellos y de su antiséptico dominio sin pesar. Aquel recinto estaba rodeado de extensiones de césped, alegradas por pajarillos furtivos y lagartos inquietos y multicolores. Estilo «Paraíso terrenal».

En cuanto a los negros, en seguida te acostumbras a ellos, a su cachaza sonriente, a sus gestos demasiado lentos y a los pletóricos vientres de sus mujeres. La negritud hiede a miseria, a vanidades interminables, a resignaciones inmundas; igual que los pobres de nuestro hemisferio, en una palabra, pero con más hijos aún y menos ropa sucia y vino tinto.

Cuando había acabado de inhalar el hospital, de olfatearlo así, profundamente, iba, tras la multitud indígena, a inmovilizarme un momento ante aquella especie de pagoda erigida cerca del Fort por un figonero para la diversión de los juerguistas eróticos de la colonia.

Los blancos acaudalados de Fort-Gono paraban allí por la noche, se emperraban en el juego, al tiempo que pimplaban de lo lindo y bostezaban y eructaban a más y mejor. Por doscientos francos se podía uno cepillar a la bella patrona. Se las veían y se las deseaban, aquellos juerguistas, para conseguir rascarse, pues no cesaban de escapárseles los tirantes.

Por la noche, salía un gentío de las chozas de la ciudad indígena y se congregaba ante la pagoda, sin hartarse nunca de ver y oír a los blancos moviendo el esqueleto en torno al organillo, de cuerdas enmohecidas, que emitía valses desafinados. La patrona hacía ademanes, al escuchar la música, como si deseara bailar, transportada de placer.

Tras varios días de tanteos, acabé teniendo charlas furtivas con ella. Sus reglas, me confió, no le duraban menos de tres semanas. Efecto de los trópicos. Además, sus consumidores la dejaban exhausta. No es que hiciesen el amor con frecuencia, pero, como los aperitivos eran bastante caros en la pagoda, intentaban sacarle el jugo a su dinero al mismo tiempo, y le daban unos pellizcos que para qué en el culo, antes de irse. A eso se debía sobre todo su fatiga.

Aquella comerciante conocía todas las historias de la colonia y los amores que se trababan, desesperados, entre los oficiales, atormentados por las fiebres, y las escasas esposas de funcionarios, que se derretían, también ellas, con reglas interminables, desconsoladas y hundidas, junto a los miradores, en butacas permanentemente inclinadas.

Los paseos, las oficinas, las tiendas de Fort-Gono rezumaban deseos mutilados. Hacer todo lo que se hace en Europa parecía ser la obsesión máxima, la satisfacción, la mueca a toda costa de aquellos dementes, pese a la abominable temperatura y al apoltronamiento en aumento, invencible.

La tupida vegetación de los jardines se mantenía a duras penas, agresiva, feroz, entre las empalizadas, follaje rebosante que formaba lechugas delirantes en torno a cada casa, enorme clara de huevo sólida y

avellanada en la que acababa de pudrirse una yemita europea. Así, había tantas ensaladeras completas como funcionarios a lo largo de la Avenue Fachoda, la más animada, la más frecuentada de Fort-Gono.

Cada noche volvía a mi morada, inacabable seguramente, donde el perverso *boy* me había hecho la cama, un esqueletito enteramente. Me tendía trampas, el *boy,* era lascivo como un gato, quería entrar en mi familia. Sin embargo, me asediaban otras preocupaciones muy distintas y mucho más vivas y sobre todo el proyecto de refugiarme por un tiempo más en el hospital, único armisticio a mi alcance en aquel carnaval tórrido.

Ni en la paz ni en la guerra sentía yo la menor inclinación hacia las futilidades. E incluso otras ofertas que me llegaron de otra procedencia, por mediación de un cocinero del patrón, de nuevo y muy sinceramente obscenas, me parecieron incoloras.

Por última vez hice la ronda de mis compañeros de la Porduriére para intentar informarme acerca de aquel empleado infiel, aquel al que yo debía, según las órdenes, ir a substituir, a toda costa, en su selva. Cháchara vana.

El Café Faidherbe, al final de la Avenue Fachoda, que zumbaba a la hora del crepúsculo con mil maledicencias, chismes y calumnias, tampoco me aportaba nada substancial. Sólo impresiones. En aquella penumbra salpicada de farolillos multicolores se vertían bidones de basura llenos de impresiones. Sacudiendo el encaje de las palmeras gigantes, el viento abatía nubes de mosquitos en las tazas. El gobernador, en la charla ambiente, quedaba para el arrastre. Su imperdonable grosería constituía el fondo de la gran conversación aperitiva en que el hígado colonial, tan nauseabundo, se descarga antes de la cena.

Todos los automóviles de Fort-Gono, una decena en total, pasaban y volvían a pasar en aquel momento por delante de la terraza. Nunca parecían ir demasiado lejos, los automóviles. La Place Faidherbe tenía un ambiente muy característico, con su recargada decoración, su superabundancia vegetal y verbal de ciudad provinciana y enloquecida del Mediodía de Francia. Los diez autos no abandonaban la Place Faidherbe sino para volver a ella cinco minutos después, realizando una vez más el mismo periplo con su cargamento de anemias europeas desteñidas, envueltas en tela gris, seres frágiles y quebradizos como sorbetes amenazados.

Pasaban así, durante semanas y años, unos delante de los otros, los colonos, hasta el momento en que ya ni se miraban, de tan hartos que estaban de detestarse. Algunos oficiales llevaban de paseo a su familia, atenta a los saludos militares y civiles, la esposa embutida en sus paños higiénicos especiales; por su parte, los niños, lastimosos ejemplares de gruesos gusanos blancos europeos, se disolvían, por el calor, en diarrea permanente.

No basta con llevar quepis para mandar, también hay que tener tropas. Bajo el clima de Fort-Gono, los mandos europeos se derretían más deprisa que la mantequilla. Allí un batallón era algo así como un terrón de azúcar en el café: cuanto más mirabas, menos lo veías. La mayoría del contingente estaba siempre en el hospital, durmiendo la mona del paludismo, atiborrado de parásitos por todos los pelos y todos los pliegues, escuadrones enteros tendidos entre pitillos y moscas, masturbándose sobre las sábanas enmohecidas, inventando trolas infinitas, de fiebre en accesos, escrupulosamente provocados y mimados.

Las pasaban putas, aquellos pobres tunelas, pléyade vergonzosa, en la dulce penumbra de los postigos verdes, chusqueros pronto desencantados, mezclados -el hospital era mixto- con los modestos dependientes de comercio, que huían, unos y otros, acosados, de la selva y los patronos.

En el embotamiento de las largas siestas palúdicas, hace tanto calor que hasta las moscas reposan. En el extremo de los brazos exangües y peludos cuelgan las novelas mugrientas a ambos lados de las camas, siempre descabaladas las novelas: la mitad de las hojas faltan por culpa de los disentéricos, que nunca tienen suficiente papel, y también de las hermanas de mal humor, que censuran a su modo las obras en que Dios no aparece respetado. Las ladillas de la tropa las atormentan también, como a todo el mundo, a las hermanas. Para rascarse mejor, van a alzarse las faldas al abrigo de los biombos, tras los cuales el muerto de esa mañana no llega a enfriarse, de tanto calor como tiene aún, él también.

Por lúgubre que fuese el hospital, aun así era el único lugar de la colonia donde podías sentirte un poco olvidado, al abrigo de los hombres de fuera, de los jefes. Vacaciones de esclavo; lo esencial, en una palabra, y la única dicha a mi alcance.

Me informaba sobre las condiciones de entrada, las costumbres de los médicos, sus manías. Ya sólo veía con desesperación y rebeldía mi marcha para la selva y me prometía ya contraer cuanto antes todas las fiebres que pasaran a mi alcance, para volver a Fort-Gono enfermo y tan descarnado, tan repugnante, que habrían de internarme y también repatriarme. Trucos para estar enfermo ya conocía, y excelentes, y aprendí otros nuevos, especiales, para las colonias.

Me aprestaba a vencer mil dificultades, pues ni los directores de la Compañía Porduriére ni los jefes de batallón se preocupan demasiado de acosar a sus flacas presas, transidas de tanto jugar a las cartas entre las camas meadas.

Me encontrarían dispuesto a pudrirme con lo que hiciera falta. Además, en general pasabas temporadas cortas en el hospital, a menos que acabaras en él de una vez por todas tu carrera colonial. Los más sutiles, los más tunelas, los mejor armados de carácter de entre los febriles conseguían a veces colarse en un transporte para la metrópoli. Era el milagro bendito. La mayoría de los enfermos hospitalizados se confesaban incapaces de nuevas astucias, vencidos por los reglamentos, y volvían a perder en la selva sus últimos kilos. Si la quinina los entregaba por completo a los gusanos estando en régimen hospitalario, el capellán les cerraba los ojos simplemente hacia las seis de la tarde y cuatro senegaleses de servicio embalaban esos restos exangües hacia el cercado de arcillas rojas, junto a la iglesia de Fort-Gono, tan caliente, ésa, bajo las chapas onduladas, que

nunca entrabas en ella dos veces seguidas, más tropical que los trópicos. Para mantenerse en pie, en la iglesia, habría habido que jadear como un perro.

Así se van los hombres, a quienes, está visto, cuesta mucho hacer todo lo que les exigen: de mariposa durante la juventud y de gusano para acabar.

Intentaba aún conseguir, por aquí, por allá, algunos detalles, informaciones para hacerme una idea. Lo que me había descrito de Bikomimbo el director me parecía, de todos modos, increíble. En una palabra, se trataba de una factoría experimental, de un intento de penetración lejos de la costa, a diez jornadas por lo menos, aislada en medio de los indígenas, de su selva, que me presentaban como una inmensa reserva pululante de animales y enfermedades.

Me preguntaba si no estarían simplemente envidiosos de mi suerte, los otros, aquellos compañeros de la Porduriére, que pasaban por alternancias de abatimiento y agresividad. Su estupidez (lo único que tenían) dependía de la calidad del alcohol que acabaran de ingerir, de las cartas que recibiesen, de la mayor o menor cantidad de esperanza que hubieran perdido en la jornada. Por regla general, cuanto más se deterioraban, más galleaban. Eran fantasmas (como Ortolan en guerra) y habrían sido capaces de cualquier audacia.

El aperitivo nos duraba tres buenas horas. Siempre se hablaba del gobernador, pivote de todas las conversaciones, y también de los robos de objetos posibles e imposibles y, por último, de la sexualidad: los tres colores de la bandera colonial. Los funcionarios presentes acusaban sin rodeos a los militares de repantigarse en la concusión y el abuso de autoridad, pero los militares les devolvían la pelota con creces. Los comerciantes, por su parte, consideraban a aquellos prebendados hipócritas impostores y saqueadores. En cuanto al gobernador, desde hacía diez buenos años circulaba cada mañana el rumor de su revocación y, sin embargo, el telegrama tan interesante de esa caída en desgracia nunca llegaba y ello a pesar de las dos cartas anónimas, por lo menos, que volaban cada semana, desde siempre, dirigidas al ministro, y que referían mil sartas de horrores muy precisos imputables al tirano local.

Los negros tienen potra con su piel parecida a la de la cebolla; por su parte, el blanco se envenena, entabicado como está entre su ácido jugo y su camiseta de punto. Por eso, ¡ay de quien se le acerque! Lo del *Amiral-Bragueton* me había servido de lección.

En el plazo de pocos días, me enteré de detalles de lo más escandalosos a propósito de mi propio director. Sobre su pasado, lleno de más canalladas que una prisión de puerto de guerra. Se descubría de todo en su pasado e incluso, supongo, magníficos errores judiciales. Es cierto que su rostro lo traicionaba, innegable, angustiosa cara de asesino o, mejor dicho, para no señalar a nadie, de hombre imprudente, con una urgencia enorme de realizarse, lo que equivale a lo mismo.

A la hora de la siesta, se veía, al pasar, desplomadas a la sombra de sus hotelitos del Boulevard Faidherbe, a algunas blancas aquí y allá, esposas de oficiales, de colonos, a las que el clima demacraba mucho más aún que a los hombres, vocecillas graciosamente vacilantes, sonrisas enormemente indulgentes, maquilladas sobre toda su palidez como agónicas contentas. Daban menos muestras de valor y dignidad, aquellas burguesas trasplantadas, que la patrona de la pagoda, que sólo podía contar consigo misma. Por su parte, la Compañía Porduriére consumía a muchos empleadillos blancos de mi estilo; cada temporada perdía decenas de esos subhombres, en sus factorías de la selva, cerca de los pantanos. Eran pioneros.

Todas las mañanas, el Ejército y el Comercio acudían a lloriquear por sus contingentes hasta las propias oficinas del hospital. No pasaba día sin que un capitán amenazara, lanzando rayos y truenos, al gerente para que le devolvieran a toda prisa sus tres sargentos jugadores de cartas y palúdicos y los dos cabos sifilíticos, mandos que le faltaban precisamente para organizar una compañía. Si le respondían que habían muerto, esos holgazanes, entonces dejaba en paz a los administradores y se volvía, por su parte, a beber un poco más a la pagoda.

Apenas te daba tiempo de verlos desaparecer, hombres, días y cosas, en aquel verdor, aquel clima, calor y mosquitos. Todo se iba, era algo repugnante, en trozos, frases, miembros, penas, glóbulos, se perdían al sol, se derretían en el torrente de la luz y los colores y con ellos el gusto y el tiempo, todo se iba. En el aire no había sino angustia centelleante.

Por fin, el pequeño carguero que debía llevarme, costeando, hasta las cercanías de mi puesto, fondeó a la vista de Fort-Gono. El *Papaoutah,* se llamaba. Un barquito de casco muy plano, construido así para los estuarios. Lo alimentaban con leña. Yo era el único blanco a bordo y me concedieron un rincón entre la cocina y los retretes, íbamos tan despacio por el mar, que al principio pensé que se trataba de una precaución para salir de la ensenada. Pero nunca aumentó la velocidad. Aquel *Papaoutah* tenía poquísima potencia. Avanzamos así, a la vista de la costa, faja gris infinita y tupida de arbolitos en medio de los danzarines vahos del calor. ¡Qué paseo! *Papaoutah* hendía el agua como si la hubiera sudado toda él mismo, con dolor. Deshacía una olita tras otra con precauciones de enfermera haciendo una cura. El piloto debía de ser, me parecía desde lejos, un mulato; digo «me parecía» porque nunca encontraba las fuerzas necesarias para subir arriba, a cubierta, a cerciorarme en persona. Me quedaba confinado con los negros, únicos pasajeros, a la sombra de la crujía, mientras el sol bañaba el puente, hasta las cinco. Para que no te queme la cabeza por los ojos, el sol, hay que pestañear como una rata. A partir de las cinco puedes echar un vistazo al horizonte, la buena vida. Aquella franja gris, el país tupido a ras del agua, allí, especie de sobaquera aplastada, no me decía nada. Era repugnante respirar aquel aire, aun de noche, tan tibio, marino enmohecido. Toda aquella insipidez deprimía, con el olor de la máquina, además, y, de día, las olas demasiado ocres por aquí y demasiado azules por el otro

lado. Se estaba peor aún que en el *Amiral-Bragueton,* exceptuando a los asesinos militares, por supuesto.

Por fin, nos acercamos al puerto de mi destino. Me recordaron su nombre: «Topo». A fuerza de toser, expectorar, temblar, durante tres veces el trascurso de cuatro comidas a base de conservas, sobre aquellas aguas aceitosas como de haber lavado los platos, el *Papaoutah* acabó atracando.

En la pilosa orilla se destacaban tres enormes chozas techadas con paja. De lejos, cobraba, al primer vistazo, un aspecto bastante atrayente. La desembocadura de un gran río arenoso, el mío, según me explicaron, por donde debía yo remontar, en barca, para llegar al centro mismo de mi selva. En Topo, puesto al borde del mar, debía quedarme sólo unos días, según lo previsto, el tiempo necesario para adoptar mis últimas resoluciones coloniales.

Pusimos rumbo a un embarcadero liviano y el *Papaoutah,* antes de llegar a él, se llevó por delante, con su grueso vientre, la barra. De bambú era el embarcadero, lo recuerdo bien. Tenía su historia, lo rehacían cada mes, me enteré, a causa de los moluscos, ágiles y vivos, que acudían a millares a jalárselo, a medida que lo arreglaban. Esa construcción infinita era incluso una de las ocupaciones desesperantes que había de sufrir el teniente Grappa, comandante del puesto de Topo y de las regiones vecinas. El *Papaoutah* sólo hacía la travesía una vez al mes, pero los moluscos no tardaban más de un mes en jalarse su desembarcadero.

A la llegada, el teniente Grappa cogió mis papeles, verificó su autenticidad, los copió en un registro virgen y me ofreció el aperitivo. Yo era el primer viajero, me confió, que acudía a Topo por espacio de más de dos años. Nadie iba a Topo. No había ninguna razón para ir a Topo. A las órdenes del teniente Grappa servía el sargento Alcide. En su aislamiento, no se estimaban nada. «Tengo que desconfiar siempre de mi subalterno - me comunicó también el teniente Grappa ya en nuestro primer contacto-. ¡Tiene cierta tendencia a la familiaridad!»

Como, en aquella desolación, si hubiera habido que imaginar acontecimientos, habrían resultado demasiado inverosímiles, pues el ambiente no se prestaba, el sargento Alcide preparaba por adelantado informes de «Sin novedad», que Grappa firmaba sin tardar y que el *Papaoutah* llevaba, puntual, al gobernador general.

Entre las lagunas de los alrededores y en lo más recóndito de la selva vegetaban algunas tribus enmohecidas, diezmadas, torturadas por el tripanosoma y la miseria crónica; aun así, aportaban un pequeño impuesto y a estacazos, por supuesto. Entre sus jóvenes reclutaban también a algunos milicianos para manejar por delegación esa misma estaca. Los efectivos de la milicia ascendían a doce hombres.

Puedo hablar de ellos, los conocí bien. El teniente Grappa los equipaba a su modo, a aquellos potrudos, y los alimentaba regularmente con arroz. Un fusil para doce y una banderita para todos. Sin zapatos. Pero, como todo es relativo en este mundo y comparativo, a los reclutas indígenas les parecía que Grappa hacía las cosas muy bien. Incluso tenía que rechazar voluntarios todos los días y entusiastas, hijos de la selva hastiados.

La caza era escasa en los alrededores de la ciudad y, a falta de gacelas, se comían al menos una abuela por semana. Todas las mañanas, a partir de las siete, los milicianos de Alcide se ponían a hacer la instrucción. Como yo me alojaba en un rincón de su choza, que me había cedido, me encontraba en primera fila para asistir a aquella algarada. En ningún otro ejército del mundo figuraron nunca soldados con mejor voluntad. A la llamada de Alcide, y recorriendo la arena en fila de cuatro, de ocho y luego de doce, aquellos primitivos se desvivían con creces imaginando sacos, zapatos, bayonetas incluso, y, lo que es más, haciendo como que los utilizaban. Recién salidos de la naturaleza tan vigorosa y tan próxima, iban vestidos sólo con una apariencia de calzoncillo caqui. Todo lo demás debían imaginarlo y así lo hacían. A la orden de Alcide, perentoria, aquellos ingeniosos guerreros, dejando en el suelo sus ficticios sacos, corrían en el vacío al ataque de enemigos imaginarios con estocadas imaginarias. Tras haber hecho como que se desabrochaban, formaban montones de ropa invisible y, ante otra señal, se apasionaban en abstracciones de mosquetería. Verlos diseminarse, gesticular minuciosamente y perderse en encajes de movimientos bruscos y prodigiosamente inútiles era deprimente hasta el marasmo. Sobre todo porque en Topo el calor brutal y la asfixia, perfectamente concentrados por la arena entre los espejos del mar y del río, pulidos y conjugados, eran como para jurar por tu trasero que te encontrabas sentado por la fuerza sobre un pedazo de sol recién caído.

Pero aquellas condiciones implacables no impedían a Alcide gritar: al contrario. Sus alaridos tronaban por encima de aquel ejercicio fantástico y llegaban muy lejos, hasta la cresta de los augustos cedros del lindero tropical. Más lejos aún retumbaban incluso sus «¡firmes!».

Mientras tanto, el teniente Grappa preparaba su justicia. Ya volveremos a hablar de *eso.* También vigilaba sin cesar desde lejos, desde la sombra de su choza, la fugaz construcción del embarcadero maldito. A cada llegada del *Papaoutah* iba a esperar, optimista y escéptico, equipos completos para sus efectivos. En vano los reclamaba desde hacía dos años, sus equipos completos. Como era corso, Grappa se sentía tal vez más humillado que nadie al observar que sus milicianos seguían desnudos.

En nuestra choza, la de Alcide, se practicaba un pequeño comercio, apenas clandestino, de cosillas y restos diversos. Por lo demás, todo el tráfico de Topo pasaba por Alcide, ya que tenía una pequeña provisión, la única, de tabaco en hoja y en paquetes, algunos litros de alcohol y algunos metros de algodón.

Los doce milicianos de Topo, sentían, era evidente, hacia Alcide auténtica simpatía y ello pese a que los abroncaba sin límites y les daba patadas en el trasero injustamente. Pero habían advertido en él, aquellos militares nudistas, elementos innegables del gran parentesco, el de la miseria incurable, innata. El tabaco los hacía sentirse unidos, por muy negros que fueran, por la fuerza de las cosas. Yo había llevado conmigo

algunos periódicos de Europa. Alcide los hojeó con el deseo de interesarse por las noticias, pero, pese a intentar por tres veces centrar su atención en las columnas inconexas, no consiguió acabarlas. «Ahora -me confesó tras ese vano intento-, en el fondo, ¡me importan un bledo las noticias! ¡Hace tres años que estoy aquí!» Eso no quería decir que Alcide pretendiera sorprenderme dándoselas de ermitaño, no, sino que la brutalidad, la indiferencia demostrada del mundo entero hacia él lo obligaba, a su vez, a considerar, en su calidad de sargento reenganchado, el mundo entero, fuera de Topo, como una Luna.

Por cierto, que era buen muchacho, Alcide, servicial y generoso y todo. Lo comprendí más adelante, demasiado tarde. Su formidable resignación lo aplastaba, esa cualidad básica que vuelve a la pobre gente, del ejército o de fuera de él, tan dispuesta a matar como a dar vida. Nunca, o casi, preguntan el porqué, los humildes, de lo que soportan. Se odian unos a otros, eso basta.

En torno a nuestra choza crecían, diseminadas, en plena laguna de arena tórrida, despiadada, esas curiosas florecillas frescas y breves, color verde, rosa o púrpura, que en Europa sólo se ven pintadas y en ciertas porcelanas, especie de campanillas primitivas y sin cursilería. Soportaban la larga jornada abominable, cerradas en su tallo, y, al abrirse por la noche, se ponían a temblar, graciosas, con las primeras brisas tibias.

Un día en que Alcide me vio ocupado en coger un ramillete, me avisó: «Cógelas, si quieres, pero no las riegues, a esas jodias, que se mueren… Son de lo más frágil, ¡no se parecen a los girasoles de cuyo cuidado encargábamos a los quintos en Rambouillet! ¡Se les podía mear encima!… ¡Se lo bebían todo!… Además, las flores son como los hombres… ¡Cuanto más grandes, más inútiles son!» Eso iba dirigido al teniente Grappa, evidentemente, cuyo cuerpo era grande y calamitoso, de manos breves, purpúreas, terribles. Manos de quien nunca entendería nada. Por lo demás, Grappa no intentaba entender.

Pasé dos semanas en Topo, durante las cuales compartí no sólo la existencia y el papeo con Alcide, sus chinches (las de cama y las de arena), sino también su quinina y el agua del pozo cercano, inexorablemente tibia y diarreica.

Un día el teniente Grappa, sintiéndose amable, me invitó, por excepción, a ir a tomar café a su casa. Era celoso, Grappa, y nunca enseñaba su concubina indígena a nadie. Así, pues, había elegido, para invitarme, un día en que su negra iba a visitar a sus padres a la aldea. También era el día de audiencia en su tribunal. Quería impresionarme.

En torno a su cabaña, esperando desde la mañana temprano, se apiñaban los querellantes, masa heterogénea y abigarrada de taparrabos y testigos chillones. Pleiteantes y público de pie, mezclados en el mismo círculo, todos con fuerte olor a ajo, sándalo, mantequilla rancia, sudor azafranado. Como los milicianos de Alcide, todos aquellos seres parecían interesados ante todo en agitarse frenéticos en la ficción; alborotaban a su alrededor en un idioma de castañuelas, al tiempo que blandían por encima de sus cabezas manos crispadas en un vendaval de argumentos.

El teniente Grappa, hundido en su sillón de mimbre, crujiente y quejumbroso, sonreía ante todas aquellas incoherencias reunidas. Se fiaba, para guiarse, del intérprete del puesto, que le respondía, a voz en grito, con demandas increíbles.

Se trataba tal vez de un cordero tuerto que unos padres se negaban a restituir, pese a que su hija, vendida legalmente, no había sido entregada al marido, por culpa de un crimen que su hermano había encontrado medio de cometer, entretanto, en la persona de la hermana de éste, que guardaba el cordero. Y muchas otras y más complicadas quejas.

A nuestra altura, cien rostros apasionados por aquellos problemas de intereses y costumbres enseñaban los dientes al emitir jijeitos secos o gluglús sonoros, palabras de negros.

El calor era máximo. Atisbabas el cielo por el ángulo del techo para ver si no se avecinaría una catástrofe. Ni siquiera una tormenta.

«¡Voy a ponerlos de acuerdo a todos en seguida! – decidió finalmente Grappa, a quien la temperatura y la palabrería inducían a las resoluciones-. ¿Dónde está el padre de la novia?… ¡Que me lo traigan!»

«¡Aquí está!», respondieron veinte compinches, al tiempo que empujaban a primera fila a un viejo negro bastante marchito, envuelto en un taparrabos amarillo que lo cubría con mucha dignidad, a la romana. Acompasaba, el viejales, todo lo que contaban a su alrededor, con el puño cerrado. No parecía en absoluto haber acudido allí para quejarse, sino para distraerse un poco con ocasión de un proceso del que ya no esperaba, desde hacía mucho, resultados positivos.

«¡Venga! – mandó Grappa-. ¡Veinte latigazos! ¡Acabemos de una vez! ¡Veinte latigazos a ese viejo macarra!… ¡Así aprenderá a venir a fastidiarme todos los jueves desde hace dos meses con su historia de corderos de chicha y nabo!»

El viejo vio a los cuatro milicianos musculosos acercársele. Al principio, no entendía lo que querían de él y después puso ojos como platos, inyectados en sangre como los de un viejo animal horrorizado, al que nunca hubieran pegado. No intentaba resistirse en realidad, pero tampoco sabía cómo colocarse para recibir con el menor dolor posible aquella zurra de la justicia.

Los milicianos le tiraban de la tela. Dos de ellos querían a toda costa que se arrodillara, los otros le ordenaban, al contrario, que se tumbara boca abajo. Por fin, se pusieron de acuerdo para dejarlo como estaba, simplemente, en el suelo, con el taparrabos alzado y recibió de entrada en espalda y marchitas nalgas una somanta de vergajazos como para hacer bramar a una burra robusta durante ocho días. Se retorcía y la fina arena mezclada con sangre salpicaba en torno a su vientre; escupía arena al gritar, parecía una perra pachona

encinta, enorme, a la que torturaran con ganas.

Los asistentes permanecieron en silencio mientras duró la escena. Sólo se oían los ruidos del castigo. Ejecutado éste, el viejo, bien vapuleado, intentaba levantarse y rodearse con el taparrabos, a la romana. Sangraba en abundancia por la boca, por la nariz y sobre todo a lo largo de la espalda. La multitud se lo llevó con un murmullo de mil chismes y comentarios en tono de entierro.

El teniente Grappa volvió a encender su puro. Delante de mí, quería mantenerse distante de aquellas cosas. No es, creo, que fuera más neroniano que otro, sólo que no le gustaba tampoco que lo obligaran a pensar. Eso le fastidiaba. Lo que lo volvía irritable en sus funciones judiciales eran las preguntas que le hacían.

Ese mismo día asistimos también a otras dos correcciones memorables, consecutivas a otras historias desconcertantes, de dotes arrebatadas, promesas de envenenamiento… compromisos equívocos… hijos dudosos…

«¡Ah! Si supieran, todos, lo poco que me importan sus litigios, ¡no abandonarían su selva para venir a fastidiarme así con sus gilipolleces!… ¿Acaso los tengo yo al corriente de mis asuntos? – concluía Grappa-. Sin embargo -prosiguió-, ¡voy a acabar creyendo que le han cogido gusto a mi justicia, esos marranos!… Hace dos años que intento asquearlos y, sin embargo, cada jueves vuelven…

Créame, si quiere, joven, ¡casi siempre vuelven los mismos!… ¡Unos viciosos, vamos!…»

Después la conversación versó sobre Toulouse, donde pasaba sin falta sus vacaciones y donde pensaba retirarse Grappa, al cabo de seis años, con su pensión. ¡Así lo tenía previsto! Estábamos tomando, tan a gusto, el «calvados», cuando nos vimos de nuevo molestados por un negro condenado a no sé qué pena y que llegaba con retraso para purgarla. Acudía espontáneamente, dos horas después que los otros, a ofrecerse para recibir la somanta. Como había realizado un recorrido de dos días y dos noches desde su aldea y por el bosque con ese fin, no estaba dispuesto a regresar con las manos vacías. Pero llegaba tarde y Grappa era intransigente en relación con la puntualidad penal. «¡Peor para él! ¡Que no se hubiera marchado la última vez!… ¡El jueves pasado fue cuando lo condené a cincuenta vergajazos, a ese cochino!»

El cliente protestaba, de todos modos, porque tenía una buena excusa: había tenido que volver a su aldea a toda prisa para enterrar a su madre. Tenía tres o cuatro madres para él solo. Discusiones…

«¡Habrá que dejarlo para la próxima audiencia!»

Pero apenas tenía tiempo, aquel cliente, para ir a su aldea y volver, de entonces hasta el jueves próximo. Protestaba. Se emperraba. Hubo que echarlo, a aquel masoquista, del campo a patadas en el culo. Eso le dio placer, de todos modos, pero no suficiente… En fin, acabó donde Alcide, quien aprovechó para venderle todo un surtido de tabaco en hoja, al masoquista, en paquete y en polvo para aspirar.

Muy divertido con aquellos múltiples incidentes, me despedí de Grappa, quien precisamente se retiraba, para la siesta, a su choza, donde ya se encontraba descansando su ama indígena, de vuelta de la aldea. Un par de chuchais espléndidos, aquella negra, bien educada por las hermanas de Gabón. No sólo sabía la joven hablar francés ceceando, sino también presentar la quinina en la mermelada y sacar las niguas de la planta de los pies. Sabía ser agradable de cien modos al colonial, sin fatigarlo o fatigándolo, según su preferencia.

Alcide estaba esperándome, un poco molesto. Aquella invitación con que acababa de honrarme el teniente Grappa fue lo que le decidió seguramente a hacerme confidencias. Y eran subidas de tono, sus confidencias. Me hizo, sin que se lo pidiera, un retrato exprés de Grappa con caca humeante. Le respondí a todo que era de la misma opinión. El punto débil de Alcide era que traficaba, pese a los reglamentos militares, absolutamente contrarios, con los negros de la selva circundante y también con los doce tiradores de su milicia. Abastecía de tabaco a toda aquella gente, sin piedad. Cuando los milicianos habían recibido su parte de tabaco, no les quedaba nada de la paga; se la habían fumado. Se la fumaban por adelantado incluso. Esa modesta práctica, en vista de la escasez de numerario en la región, perjudicaba, según Grappa, a la recaudación de impuestos.

El teniente Grappa, prudente, no quería provocar bajo su gobierno un escándalo en Topo, pero en fin, celoso tal vez, ponía mala cara. Le habría gustado que todas las minúsculas disponibilidades indígenas estuvieran destinadas, como es lógico, a los impuestos. Cada cual con su estilo y sus modestas ambiciones.

Al principio, la práctica del crédito en función del salario les había parecido un poco extraña e incluso dura, a los tiradores, que trabajaban únicamente para fumar el tabaco de Alcide, pero se habían acostumbrado a fuerza de patadas en el culo. Ahora ya ni siquiera intentaban ir a cobrar su paga, se la fumaban por adelantado, tranquilamente, junto a la choza de Alcide, entre las vivaces florecillas, entre dos ejercicios de imaginación.

En resumen, en Topo, por minúsculo que fuera el lugar, había, pese a todo, sitio para dos sistemas de civilización, la del teniente Grappa, más bien a la romana, que azotaba al sumiso para extraerle simplemente el tributo, del que, según la afirmación de Alcide, retenía una parte vergonzosa y personal, y el sistema de Alcide propiamente dicho, más complicado, en el que se vislumbraban ya los signos de la segunda etapa civilizadora, el nacimiento en cada tirador de un cliente, combinación comercial o militar, en una palabra, mucho más moderna, más hipócrita, la nuestra.

En lo relativo a la geografía, el teniente Grappa calculaba apenas, con ayuda de algunos mapas muy aproximativos que tenía en el puesto, los vastos territorios confiados a su custodia. Tampoco tenía demasiado deseo de saber más sobre aquellos territorios. Los árboles, la selva ya se sabe, al fin y al cabo, lo que son, se los ve muy bien desde lejos.

Ocultas entre el follaje y los recovecos de aquella inmensa tisana, algunas tribus extraordinariamente

diseminadas se pudrían aquí y allá entre sus pulgas y sus moscas, embrutecidas por los tótems y atiborrándose de mandioca podrida… Pueblos de una ingenuidad perfecta y un canibalismo candido, azotados por la miseria, devastados por mil pestes. Nada por lo que valiera la pena acercarse a ellos. Nada justificaba una expedición administrativa dolorosa y sin eco. Cuando había acabado de imponer la ley, Grappa prefería volverse hacia el mar y contemplar aquel horizonte por el que cierto día había aparecido él y por el que cierto día desaparecería, si todo iba bien. Pese a que aquel lugar había llegado a serme familiar y, al final, agradable, tuve, sin embargo, que pensar en abandonar por fin Topo para dirigirme a la tienda que me estaba prometida al cabo de unos días de navegación fluvial y de peregrinaciones selváticas.

Alcide y yo habíamos llegado a entendernos muy bien. Intentábamos juntos pescar peces-sierra, especie de tiburones que pululaban delante de la choza. Él era tan poco hábil para ese juego como yo. No pescábamos nada.

Su choza estaba amueblada sólo con su cama desmontable, la mía y algunas cajas vacías o llenas. Me parecía que debía de ahorrar bastante dinero gracias a su modesto comercio.

«¿Dónde lo metes?… -le pregunté en varias ocasiones-. ¿Dónde lo escondes, tu asqueroso parné? – Era para hacerle rabiar-. Menuda vidorra te vas a dar, cuando regreses.» Yo lo pinchaba. Y veinte veces por lo menos, mientras nos poníamos a comer el inevitable «tomate en conserva», imaginaba, para su regocijo, las peripecias de un periplo fenomenal, a su regreso a Burdeos, de burdel en burdel. No me respondía nada. Se limitaba a reírse, como si le divirtiera que le dijese esas cosas.

Aparte de la instrucción y las sesiones de justicia, no ocurría nada, la verdad, en Topo, conque, por fuerza, yo repetía lo más a menudo posible mi chiste de siempre, a falta de otros temas.

Hacia el final, una vez me dieron ganas de escribir al Sr. Puta, para darle un sablazo. Alcide se encargaría de echar al correo mi carta en el próximo *Papaoutah.* El material de escritura de Alcide estaba guardado en una cajita de galletas, como la de Branledore, la misma exactamente. Así, pues, todos los sargentos reenganchados tenían la misma costumbre. Pero, cuando me vio abrir la caja, Alcide hizo un gesto que me sorprendió, para impedírmelo. Me sentí violento. No sabía por qué me lo impedía; volví, pues, a dejarla sobre la mesa. «¡Bah! ¡Ábrela, anda! – dijo por fin-. ¡No tiene importancia!» Al instante vi, pegada al reverso de la tapa, la foto de una niña. Sólo la cabeza, una carita muy dulce, por cierto, con largos bucles, como se llevaban en aquella época. Cogí el papel y la pluma y volví a cerrar rápido la caja. Me sentía muy violento por mi indiscreción, pero también me preguntaba por qué lo habría turbado tanto aquello.

Al instante imaginé que se trataba de una hija suya, de la que no había querido hablarme hasta entonces. Yo no quería saber más, pero le oí detrás, a mi espalda, intentando contarme algo en relación con la foto, con voz extraña, que nunca le había oído hasta entonces. Farfullaba. Yo quería que me tragara la tierra. Tenía que ayudarlo a hacerme su confidencia. No sabía qué hacer para pasar aquel momento. Iba a ser una confidencia penosa, estaba seguro. La verdad es que no deseaba escucharla.

«¡No tiene importancia! – oí que decía por fin-. Es la hija de mi hermano… Murieron los dos…»

«¿Sus padres?…»

«Sí, sus padres…»

«Entonces, ¿quién la cría ahora? ¿Tu madre?», le pregunté, por decir algo, por manifestar interés.

«¿Mi madre? También murió…»

«Entonces, ¿quién?»

«¡Pues yo!»

Lanzó una risita, Alcide, carmesí, como si acabara de hacer algo indecoroso. Se apresuró a proseguir:

«Mira, te voy a explicar… Está en un colegio de monjas de Burdeos… Pero no de las hermanitas de los pobres, ¿eh?… Las monjas "bien"… Como soy yo quien me ocupo de ello, no hay cuidado. ¡No quiero que le falte de nada! Ginette, se llama… Es una niña muy buena… Como su madre, por cierto… Me escribe, progresa; sólo, que los pensionados así, verdad, son caros… Sobre todo porque ahora tiene diez años… Quiero que aprenda el piano al mismo tiempo… ¿Qué te parece el piano?… Está bien, ¿eh?, el piano para las chicas… ¿No crees?… ¿Y el inglés? ¿Es útil también el inglés?… ¿Lo sabes tú el inglés?…»

Me puse a mirarlo más de cerca, a Alcide, a medida que iba confesando la culpa de no ser demasiado generoso, con su bigotito cosmético, sus cejas de excéntrico, su piel calcinada. ¡Púdico Alcide! ¡Qué de economías debía de haber hecho sobre su mísera paga… sobre sus famélicas primas y su minúsculo comercio clandestino… durante meses, años, en aquel Topo infernal!… Yo no sabía qué responderle, no me sentía competente, pero me superaba tanto, en corazón, que me puse colorado como un tomate… Al lado de Alcide, un simple patán impotente, yo, basto y vano… De nada servía simular. Estaba claro.

Ya no me atrevía a hablarle, me sentía de pronto absolutamente indigno de hablarle. Yo que el simple día antes no le hacía demasiado caso e incluso lo despreciaba un poco, a Alcide.

«No he tenido potra -prosiguió, sin darse cuenta de que me ponía violento con sus confidencias-. Imagínate que hace dos años le dio la parálisis infantil… Figúrate… ¿Sabes tú lo que es la parálisis infantil?»

Entonces me explicó que la pierna izquierda de la niña permanecía atrofiada y que seguía un tratamiento a base de electricidad en Burdeos, con un especialista.

«¿Crees tú que la podrá recuperar?…», me preguntaba inquieto.

Le aseguré que se podía recuperar perfectamente, del todo, con el tiempo y la electricidad. Hablaba de su madre, que había muerto, y de la enfermedad de la pequeña con muchas precauciones. Temía, incluso de

lejos, hacerle daño.

«¿Has ido a verla después de la enfermedad?»

«No… estaba aquí.»

«¿Vas a ir a verla pronto?»

«Creo que no voy a poder hasta dentro de tres años… Date cuenta, aquí hago un poco de comercio… Conque eso la ayuda… Si me marchara de permiso ahora, al regreso me habrían cogido el puesto… sobre todo por ese otro cabrón…»

Así, Alcide sólo pedía la posibilidad de ampliar su estancia al doble, cumplir seis años seguidos en Topo, en lugar de tres, por su sobrinita, de la que sólo tenía unas cartas y el retratito. «Lo que me preocupa -prosiguió, cuando nos acostamos- es que no tenga a nadie allí para las vacaciones… Es duro para una niña…»

Evidentemente, Alcide evolucionaba en lo sublime con facilidad y, por así decir, con familiaridad, tuteaba a los ángeles, aquel muchacho, y parecía un mosquita muerta. Había ofrecido, casi sin darse cuenta, a una niña vagamente emparentada, años de tortura, la aniquilación de su pobre vida en aquella monotonía tórrida, sin condiciones, sin regateo, sin otro interés que el de su buen corazón. Ofrecía a aquella niña lejana ternura suficiente para rehacer un mundo entero y era algo que no se veía.

Se quedó dormido de repente, a la luz de la vela. Acabé levantándome para mirar en detalle sus facciones a la luz. Dormía como todo el mundo. Tenía aspecto muy corriente. Sin embargo, no sería ninguna tontería que hubiera algo para distinguir a los buenos de los malos.

Hay dos métodos para penetrar en la selva, o bien abrir un túnel en ella, como las ratas en los haces de heno. Ése es el método asfixiante. No me hacía ninguna gracia. O bien soportar la subida río arriba, encogidito en el fondo de un tronco de árbol, impulsado con pagaya entre recodos y boscajes, y, acechando así el fin de días y días, ofrecerse de plano al resplandor, sin recurso. Y después, atontado por los aullidos de los negros, llegar adonde vayas hecho una lástima.

Todas las veces, al arrancar, para coger el ritmo, necesitan tiempo, los remeros. La disputa. Primero una pala entra en el agua y después dos o tres alaridos acompasados y la selva responde, remolinos, te deslizas, dos remos, luego tres, todavía descompasados, olas, titubeos, una mirada atrás te devuelve al mar, que se extiende allá, se aleja, y ante ti la larga extensión lisa que se va labrando, y luego Alcide aún, un poco, sobre el embarcadero, al que veo lejos, casi oculto por los vahos del río, bajo su enorme casco, en forma de campana, un trocito de cabeza, de cara, como un quesito, y el resto de Alcide debajo flotando en su túnica, como perdido ya en un recuerdo extraño con pantalones blancos.

Eso es todo lo que me queda de aquel lugar, de aquel Topo.

¿Habrán podido defenderla aún por mucho tiempo, aquella aldea ardiente, de la guadaña solapada del río de aguas color canela? Y sus tres chozas pulgosas, ¿seguirán aún en pie? ¿Habrá nuevos Grappas y Alcides entrenando a tiradores recientes en esos combates inconsistentes? ¿Seguirán ejerciendo aquella justicia sin pretensiones? ¿Seguirá tan rancia el agua que intenten beber? ¿Tan tibia? Como para asquearte de tu propia boca durante ocho días después de cada ronda… ¿Seguirán sin nevera? ¿Y los combates de oído que libran contra las moscas los infatigables abejorros de la quinina? ¿Sulfato? ¿Clorhidrato?… Pero, antes que nada, ¿existirán aún negros pustulentos desecándose en aquella estufa? Muy bien puede ser que no…

Tal vez nada de eso exista ya, quizás el pequeño Congo haya lamido Topo de un gran lengüetazo cenagoso una noche de tornado, al pasar, y ya no quede nada, haya desaparecido de los mapas hasta el nombre, ya sólo quede yo, en una palabra, para recordar aún a Alcide… Tal vez lo haya olvidado su sobrina también. Puede que el teniente Grappa no haya vuelto a ver su Toulouse… Que la selva que acechaba desde siempre la duna, al regreso de la estación de las lluvias, haya invadido todo, haya aplastado todo bajo la sombra de las inmensas caobas, todo, hasta las florecillas imprevistas de la arena, que, según Alcide, no había que regar… Que ya no exista nada.

Lo que fueron los diez días de ascenso río arriba es algo que no olvidaré por mucho tiempo… Transcurridos vigilando los remolinos cenagosos, en el hueco de la piragua, eligiendo un paso furtivo tras otro, entre los ramajes enormes a la deriva, evitados con agilidad. Trabajo de forzados evadidos.

Después de cada crepúsculo, nos deteníamos en un promontorio rocoso. Una mañana, abandonamos por fin aquella sucia lancha salvaje para entrar en la selva por un sendero oculto que se insinuaba en la penumbra verde y húmeda, iluminado sólo a ratos por un rayo de sol que caía desde lo alto de aquella infinita catedral de hojas. Monstruosos árboles caídos obligaban a nuestro grupo a dar muchos rodeos. En su hueco un metro entero habría maniobrado a sus anchas.

En determinado momento volvió la luz deslumbrante, habíamos llegado ante un espacio desbrozado, tuvimos que subir aún, otro esfuerzo. La eminencia que alcanzamos coronaba la infinita selva, encrespada con cimas amarillas, rojas y verdes, que poblaba, estrujaba montes y valles, monstruosamente abundante como el cielo y el agua. El hombre cuya vivienda buscábamos vivía, me indicaron con señas, un poco más lejos… en otro vallecito. Allí nos esperaba, el hombre.

Entre dos grandes rocas se había construido una especie de refugio, al abrigo, me hizo observar, de los tornados del Este, los peores, los más iracundos. No tuve inconveniente en reconocer que era una ventaja, pero en cuanto a la choza misma pertenecía con toda seguridad a la última categoría, la más astrosa, vivienda casi teórica, deshilachada por todos lados. Me esperaba sin falta algo por el estilo en punto a vivienda, pero, aun así, la realidad superaba mis previsiones.

Debí de parecerle por completo desconsolado al tipo aquel, pues se dirigió a mí con bastante brusquedad para hacerme salir de mis reflexiones. «¡Ande, hombre, que no estará usted tan mal aquí como en la guerra! Al fin y al cabo, ¡aquí puede uno salir adelante! Se jala mal, de acuerdo, y para beber, auténtico lodo, pero se puede dormir cuanto se quiera… ¡Aquí, amigo, no hay cañones! ¡Ni balas tampoco! En una palabra, ¡es buen asunto!» Hablaba un poco en el mismo tono que el delegado general, pero tenía ojos pálidos como los de Alcide.

Debía de andar por los treinta años y era barbudo… No lo había mirado bien, al llegar, de tan desconcertado como estaba, al llegar, con la pobreza de su instalación, la que debía legarme y que había de acogerme durante años tal vez… Pero, al observarlo, después, más adelante, le vi cara de aventurero innegable, cara muy angulosa e incluso rebelde, de esas que entran a saco en la existencia en lugar de colarse por ella, con gruesa nariz redonda, por ejemplo, y mejillas llenas en forma de gabarras, que van a chapotear contra el destino con un ruido de parloteo. Aquél era un desdichado.

«¡Es cierto! – dije-. ¡Nada hay peor que la guerra!»

Ya era bastante de momento, en punto a confidencias, yo no tenía ganas de decir nada más. Pero fue él quien continuó sobre el mismo tema:

«Sobre todo ahora que las hacen tan largas, las guerras… -añadió-. En fin, ya verá, amigo, que esto no es demasiado divertido, ¡y se acabó! No hay nada que hacer… Es como unas vacaciones… Pero es que, ¡vacaciones aquí! ¿No?… En fin, tal vez dependa del carácter, no puedo decir…»

«¿Y el agua?», pregunté. La que veía en mi cubilete, que me había vertido yo mismo, me inquietaba, amarillenta; bebí, nauseabunda y caliente como la de Topo. Al tercer día tenía posos.

«¿Es ésta el agua?» La tortura del agua volvía a empezar.

«Sí, es la única que hay por aquí y, además, la de la lluvia… Sólo, que, cuando llueva, la cabaña no resistirá mucho tiempo. ¿Ve usted en qué estado se encuentra la cabaña?» Veía, en efecto.

«Para comer -siguió diciendo- sólo hay conservas, hace un año que no jalo otra cosa… ¡Y no me he muerto!… En un sentido es muy cómodo, pero el cuerpo no lo retiene; los indígenas jalan mandioca podrida, allá ellos, les gusta… Desde hace tres meses lo devuelvo todo… La diarrea. Tal vez la fiebre también; tengo las dos cosas… Y hasta veo más claro hacia las cinco de la tarde… Por eso noto que tengo fiebre, porque, por el calor, verdad, ¡es difícil tener más temperatura que la que se tiene aquí sólo con el calor del ambiente!… En una palabra, los escalofríos son los que te avisan de que tienes fiebre… Y también porque te aburres menos… Pero también eso debe de depender del carácter de cada uno… quizá podría uno beber alcohol para animarse, pero a mí no me gusta el alcohol… No lo soporto…»

Me parecía que tenía mucho respeto por lo que él llamaba «el carácter».

Y después, ya que estaba, me dio otras informaciones atractivas: «Por el día el calor, pero es que por la noche es el ruido lo que resulta más difícil de soportar… Es increíble… Son los bichos de la aldea que se persiguen para cepillarse o jalarse vivos a otros, no sé, eso es lo que me han dicho… el caso es que entonces, ¡se arma un jaleo!… Y las más ruidosas, ¡son también las hienas!… Llegan hasta ahí, muy cerca de la cabaña… Ya las oirá usted… No puede equivocarse… No son como los ruidos de la quinina… A veces se puede uno equivocar con las aves, los moscones y la quinina… A veces pasa… Mientras que las hienas se ríen de lo lindo… Olfatean la carne de uno… ¡Eso las hace reír!… ¡Tienen prisa por verte cascar, esos bichos!… Según dicen, hasta se les puede ver los ojos brillar… Les gusta la carroña… Yo no las he mirado a los ojos… En cierto modo lo siento…».

«Pues, ¡sí que está esto divertido!», fui y respondí.

Pero aún faltaba algo para el encanto de las noches.

«Y, además, la aldea -añadió-. No hay ni cien negros en ella, pero arman un tiberio, los maricones, ¡como si fueran dos mil!… ¡Ya verá usted también lo que son ésos! ¡Ah! Si ha venido usted por el tam-tam, ¡no se ha equivocado de colonia!… Porque aquí lo tocan porque hay luna y después porque no la hay… Y luego porque esperan la luna… En fin, ¡siempre por algo! ¡Parece como si se entendieran con los bichos para fastidiarte, esos cabrones! Como para volverse loco, ¡se lo aseguro! Yo me los cargaba a todos de una vez, ¡si no estuviera tan cansado!… Pero prefiero ponerme algodón en los oídos… Antes, cuando aún me quedaba vaselina en el botiquín, me la ponía, en el algodón, ahora pongo grasa de plátano en su lugar. También va bien, la grasa de plátano… Así, ¡ya se pueden correr de gusto con todos los truenos del cielo, esos maricones, si eso los excita! ¡A mí me la trae floja, con mi algodón engrasado! ¡No oigo nada! Los negros, se dará usted cuenta en seguida, ¡están hechos una mierda!… Pasan el día en cuclillas, parecen incapaces de levantarse para ir a mear siquiera contra un árbol y después, en cuanto se hace de noche, ¡menudo! ¡Se vuelven viciosos! ¡Puro nervio! ¡Histéricos! ¡Pedazos de noche atacados de histeria! Ya ve usted cómo son los negros, ¡se lo digo yo! En fin, una panda de asquerosos… ¡Degenerados, vamos!…»

«¿Vienen a menudo a comprar?»

«¿A comprar? ¡Figúrese usted! Hay que robarles antes que le roben a uno, ¡eso es el comercio y se acabó! Por cierto que conmigo, durante la noche, no se andan con chiquitas, lógicamente con mi algodón bien engrasado en cada oído, ¿no? ¿Para qué van a andarse con remilgos? ¿Verdad?… Y, además, como ve, tampoco tengo puertas en la choza, conque vienen y se sirven, ¿no?, puede usted estar seguro… Menuda vida se pegan aquí ellos…»

«Pero, ¿y el inventario? – pregunté, presa del mayor asombro ante aquellas precisiones-. El director general

me recomendó con insistencia que estableciera el inventario nada más llegar ¡y minuciosamente!»

«A mí -fue y me respondió con perfecta calma- el director general me la trae floja… Tengo el gusto de decírselo…»

«Pero, ¿va usted a verlo, al pasar otra vez por Fort-Gono?»

«No voy a ver nunca más m Fort-Gono ni al director… La selva es grande, amigo mío…»

«Pero, entonces, ¿adonde irá usted?»

«Si se lo preguntan, ¡responda que no lo sabe! Pero, como parece usted curioso, déjeme, ahora que aún está a tiempo, darle un puñetero consejo, ¡y muy útil! Mande a tomar por culo a la Compañía Porduriére como ella lo manda a usted y, si se da tanta prisa como ella, ¡le aseguro desde ahora mismo que ganará usted sin duda el Gran Premio!… ¡Conténtese, pues, con que yo le deje un poco de dinero en metálico y no pida más!… En cuanto a las mercancías, si es cierto que le ha recomendado hacerse cargo de ellas… respóndale al director que no quedaba nada, ¡y se acabó!… Si se niega a creerlo, pues, ¡tampoco importará demasiado!… ¡Ya nos consideran, convencidos, ladrones a todos, en cualquier caso! Conque no va a cambiar nada la opinión pública y para una vez que le vamos a sacar algo… Además, no tema, ¡el director sabe más que nadie de chanchullos y no vale la pena contradecirlo! ¡Ésa es mi opinión! ¿Y la de usted? Ya se sabe que para venir aquí, verdad, ¡hay que estar dispuesto a matar a padre y madre! Conque…»

Yo no estaba del todo seguro de que fuera cierto, todo lo que me contaba, pero el caso es que aquel predecesor me pareció al instante un pirata de mucho cuidado.

Nada, pero es que nada, tranquilo me sentía yo. «Ya me he metido en otro lío de la hostia», me dije a mí mismo y cada vez más convencido. Dejé de conversar con aquel bandido. En un rincón, en desorden, descubrí a la buena de Dios las mercancías que tenía a bien dejarme, cotonadas insignificantes… Pero, en cambio, taparrabos y sandalias por docenas, pimienta en botes, farolillos, un irrigador y, sobre todo, una cantidad alarmante de latas de fabada «estilo de Burdeos» y, por último, una tarjeta postal en color: la Place Clichy.

«Junto al poste encontrará el caucho y el marfil que he comprado a los negros… Al principio, perdía el culo, y después, ya ve, tome, trescientos francos… ¡Ésa es la cuenta!»

Yo no sabía de qué cuenta se trataba, pero renuncié a preguntárselo.

«Quizá tendrá aún que hacer algunos trueques con mercancías -me avisó-, porque el dinero aquí, verdad, no se necesita para nada, sólo puede servir para largarse, el dinero…»

Y se echó a reír. Como tampoco quería yo contrariarlo por el momento, lo imité y me reí con él como si estuviera muy contento.

A pesar de la indigencia en que se veía estancado desde hacía meses, se había rodeado de una servidumbre muy complicada, compuesta de chavales sobre todo, muy solícitos a la hora de presentarle la única cuchara de la casa o el vaso sin pareja o también extraerle de la planta del pie, con delicadeza, las incesantes y clásicas niguas penetrantes. A cambio, les pasaba, benévolo, la mano entre los muslos a cada instante. El único trabajo que le vi emprender era el de rascarse personalmente; ahora que a ése se entregaba, como el tendero de Fort-Gono, con una agilidad maravillosa, que, sólo se observa, está visto, en las colonias.

El mobiliario que me legó me reveló todo lo que el ingenio podía conseguir con cajas de jabón rotas en materia de sillas, veladores y sillones. También me enseñó, aquel tipo sombrío, a proyectar a lo lejos, para distraerse, de un solo golpe breve, con la punta del pie pronta, las pesadas orugas con caparazón, que subían sin cesar, nuevas, trémulas y babosas, al asalto de nuestra choza selvática. Si, por torpeza, las aplastas, ¡pobre de ti! Te ves castigado con ocho días consecutivos de hedor extremo, que se desprende despacio de su papilla inolvidable. Él había leído en alguna parte que esos pesados horrores representaban, en el terreno de los animales, lo más antiguo que había en el mundo. Databan según afirmaba, ¡del segundo período geológico! «Cuando nosotros tengamos la misma antigüedad que ellas, ¡qué peste no echaremos!» Así mismo.

Los crepúsculos en aquel infierno africano eran espléndidos. No había modo de evitarlos. Trágicos todas las veces como tremendos asesinatos del sol. Una farolada inmensa. Sólo, que era demasiada admiración para un solo hombre. El cielo, durante una hora, se pavoneaba salpicado de un extremo a otro de escarlata en delirio, luego estallaba el verde en medio de los árboles y subía del suelo en estelas trémulas hasta las primeras estrellas. Después, el gris volvía a ocupar todo el horizonte y luego el rojo también, pero entonces fatigado, el rojo, y por poco tiempo. Terminaba así. Todos los colores recaían en jirones, marchitos, sobre la selva, como oropeles al cabo de cien representaciones. Cada día hacia las seis en punto ocurría.

Y la noche con todos sus monstruos entraba entonces en danza, entre miles y miles de berridos de sapos.

Ésa era la señal que esperaba la selva para ponerse a trepidar, silbar, bramar desde todas sus profundidades. Una enorme estación del amor y sin luz, llena hasta reventar. Árboles enteros atestados de francachelas vivas, de erecciones mutiladas, de horror. Acabábamos no pudiendo oírnos en nuestra choza. Tenía que gritar, a mi vez, por encima de la mesa como un autillo para que el compañero me entendiera. Estaba listo, yo que no apreciaba el campo.

«¿Cómo se llama usted? ¿No me acaba de decir Robinson?», le pregunté.

Estaba repitiéndome, el compañero, que los indígenas en aquellos parajes sufrían hasta el marasmo de todas las enfermedades posibles y que su estado era tan lastimoso, que no estaban en condiciones de dedicarse a comercio alguno. Mientras hablábamos de los negros, moscas e insectos, tan grandes, tan numerosos, vinieron a lanzarse en torno al farol, en ráfagas tan densas, que hubo que apagarlo.

La figura de aquel Robinson se me apareció una vez más, antes de apagar, cubierta por aquella rejilla dé

insectos. Tal vez por eso sus rasgos se grabaron de modo más sutil en mi memoria, mientras que antes no me recordaban nada preciso. En la obscuridad seguía hablándome, mientras yo me remontaba por mi pasado, con el tono de su voz como una llamada, ante las puertas de los años y después de los meses y luego de los días, para preguntar dónde había podido conocer a aquel individuo. Pero no encontraba nada. No me respondían. Se puede uno perder yendo a tientas entre las formas del pasado. Es espantoso la de cosas y personas que permanecen inmóviles en el pasado de uno. Los vivos que extraviamos en las criptas del tiempo duermen tan bien con los muertos, que una misma sombra los confunde ya.

No sabes ya a quién despertar, si a los vivos o a los muertos.

Estaba intentando identificar a aquel Robinson, cuando unas carcajadas atrozmente exageradas, a poca distancia y en la obscuridad, me sobresaltaron. Y se callaron. Ya me había avisado, las hienas seguramente.

Y después sólo los negros de la aldea y su tam-tam, percusión desatinada sobre madera hueca, termitas del viento.

El propio nombre de Robinson me preocupaba sobre todo, cada vez más claramente. Nos pusimos a hablar de Europa en nuestra obscuridad, de las comidas que puedes pedir allá, cuando tienes dinero, y de las bebidas, ¡madre mía, tan frescas! No hablábamos del día siguiente, en que me quedaría solo, allí, durante años tal vez, allí, con todas las fabadas… ¿Había que preferir la guerra? Desde luego, era peor. ¡Era peor!… Él mismo lo reconocía… También él había estado en la guerra… Y, sin embargo, se marchaba de allí… Estaba harto de la selva, pese a todo… Yo intentaba hacerlo volver sobre el tema de la guerra. Pero ahora él lo eludía.

Por último, en el momento en que nos acostábamos cada uno en un rincón de aquella ruina formada por hojas y mamparas, me confesó sin rodeos que, pensándolo bien, prefería arriesgarse a comparecer ante un tribunal civil por estafa a soportar por más tiempo la vida, a base de fabada, que llevaba allí desde hacía casi un año. Ya sabía a qué atenerme.

«¿No tiene algodón para los oídos?… -me preguntó-. Si no tiene, hágase uno con pelos de la manta y grasa de plátano. Así se hacen unos taponcitos perfectos… ¡No quiero oírlos berrear, a esos cerdos!»

Había de todo en aquella tormenta, excepto cerdos, pero se empeñaba en usar ese término impropio y genérico.

La cuestión del algodón me impresionó de repente, como si ocultara alguna astucia abominable por su parte. No podía evitar un miedo cerval a que me asesinara allí, sobre la «plegable», antes de marcharse con lo que quedaba en la choza… Esa idea me tenía petrificado. Pero, ¿qué hacer? ¿Llamar? ¿A quién? ¿A los antropófagos de la aldea?… ¿Desaparecido? ¡Ya lo estaba casi, en realidad! En París, sin fortuna, sin deudas, sin herencia, ya apenas existes, cuesta mucho no estar ya desaparecido… Conque, ¿allí? ¿Quién iba a tomarse la molestia de ir hasta Bikomimbo, aunque sólo fuera a escupir en el agua, para honrar mi recuerdo? Nadie, evidentemente.

Pasaron horas cargadas de respiros y angustias. Él no roncaba. Todos aquellos ruidos, aquellas llamadas que llegaban del bosque me impedían oír su resuello. No hacía falta algodón. Sin embargo, a fuerza de tenacidad, aquel nombre de Robinson acabó revelándome un cuerpo, una facha, una voz incluso que había conocido… Y después, en el momento en que iba a abandonarme al sueño, el individuo entero se alzó ante mi cama, capté su recuerdo, no él, desde luego, sino el recuerdo precisamente de aquel Robinson, el hombre de Noirceur-sur-la-Lys, allí, en Flandes, a quien había acompañado aquella noche en que buscábamos juntos un agujero para escapar de la guerra y después también él más adelante en París… Reapareció todo… Acababan de pasar años en un instante. Yo había estado muy enfermo de la cabeza, me costaba… Ahora que sabía, que lo había identificado, no podía por menos de sentir pánico. ¿Me habría reconocido él? En cualquier caso, podía contar con mi silencio y mi complicidad.

«¡Robinson! ¡Robinson! – lo llamé, contento, como para anunciarle una buena noticia-. ¡Oye, chaval! ¡Oye, Robinson!…» Sin respuesta.

Con el corazón latiéndome como loco, me levanté y me preparé para recibir un buen golpe en el estómago… Nada. Entonces, con no poca audacia, me aventuré, a ciegas, hasta el otro extremo de la choza, donde lo había visto acostarse. Se había marchado.

Esperé la llegada del día encendiendo una cerilla de vez en cuando. El día llegó en una tromba de luz y después aparecieron los criados negros para ofrecerme, sonrientes, su enorme inutilidad, salvo que eran alegres. Ya intentaban enseñarme la despreocupación. En vano procuraba, mediante una serie de gestos muy meditados, hacerles comprender hasta qué punto me inquietaba la desaparición de Robinson, no por ello parecía que dejara de importarles tres cojones. No cabe duda, es una locura completa ocuparse de algo distinto de lo que se tiene ante los ojos. En fin, yo lo que sentía sobre todo en aquel caso era la desaparición de la caja. Pero no es frecuente volver a ver a la gente que se marcha con la caja… Esa circunstancia me hizo suponer que Robinson renunciaría a volver sólo para asesinarme. Menos mal.

¡Para mí solo el paisaje, pues! En adelante iba a tener todo el tiempo del mundo, pensé, para volver a ocuparme de la superficie, de la profundidad de aquel inmenso follaje, de aquel océano de rojo, de amarillo jaspeado, de salazones flameantes, magníficos, seguramente, para quienes amen la naturaleza. Yo, desde luego, no la amaba. La poesía de los trópicos me repugnaba. La mirada, el pensamiento sobre aquellos conjuntos me repetían, como sardinas. Digan lo que digan, siempre será un país para mosquitos y panteras. Cada cual en su sitio.

Prefería volver de nuevo a mi choza y apuntalarla en previsión del tornado, que no podía tardar. Pero

también tuve que renunciar bastante pronto a mi empresa de consolidación. Lo que de trivial había en aquella estructura podía aún desplomarse, pero no volvería a alzarse nunca; la paja, infestada de parásitos, se deshilachaba; la verdad es que con mi vivienda no se habría podido hacer un urinario decente.

Tras haber descrito, con paso inseguro, unos círculos en la selva, tuve que volver a tumbarme y callarme, por el sol. Siempre el sol. Todo calla, todo tiene miedo a arder hacia el mediodía; basta, por cierto, con un tris, hierbas, animales y hombres en su punto de calor. Es la apoplejía meridiana.

Mi pollo, el único, la temía también, esa hora, volvía a la choza conmigo, él, el único, legado por Robinson. Vivió así conmigo tres semanas, el pollo, paseándose, siguiéndome como un perro, cloqueando por cualquier cosa, viendo serpientes por todos lados. Un día de aburrimiento mortal me lo comí. No sabía a nada, su carne desteñida al sol como una tela de algodón. Tal vez fuera eso lo que me sentara mal. El caso es que el día siguiente de haberlo comido no podía levantarme. Hacia el mediodía, me arrastré atontado hacia la cajita de las medicinas. Sólo quedaba tintura de yodo y un plano de la Línea de metro norte-sur de París. Aún no había visto clientes en la factoría, sólo mirones negros, que no cesaban de gesticular y masticar cola, eróticos y palúdicos. Ahora se presentaban en círculo en torno a mí, los negros, parecían discutir sobre mi mala cara. Estaba muy enfermo, hasta el punto de que me parecía que ya no necesitaba las piernas, colgaban tan sólo al borde de la cama como cosas despreciables y algo cómicas.

De Fort-Gono, del director, no me llegaban, mediante corredores nativos, sino cartas apestosas con broncas y estupideces, amenazadoras también. Los comerciantes, que se creen, todos, astutos de profesión, resultan en la práctica la mayoría de las veces ineptos insuperables. Mi madre, desde Francia, me instaba a cuidar la salud, como en la guerra. Bajo la guillotina, mi madre habría sido capaz de reñirme por haber olvidado la bufanda. No perdía oportunidad, mi madre, para intentar hacerme creer que el mundo era benévolo y que había hecho bien al concebirme. Es el gran subterfugio de la incuria materna, esa supuesta providencia. Por lo demás, me resultaba muy fácil no responder a todos aquellos cuentos del patrón y de mi madre y nunca contestaba. Sólo, que esa actitud no mejoraba tampoco la situación.

Robinson había robado casi todo lo que había habido en aquel establecimiento frágil, ¿y quién me creería, si fuera a decirlo? ¿Escribirlo? ¿Para qué? ¿A quién? ¿Al patrón? Todas las tardes, hacia las cinco, tiritaba de fiebre, a mi vez, pero es que con ganas, hasta el punto de que mi crujiente cama temblaba como si estuviera cascándomela. Negros de la aldea se habían apoderado, sin cumplidos, de mi servicio y mi choza; no los había llamado, pero ya sólo mandarles marcharse exigía demasiado esfuerzo. Se peleaban en torno a lo que quedaba de la factoría, metiendo mano con ganas en los barriles de tabaco, probándose los últimos taparrabos, apreciándolos, llevándoselos, contribuyendo aún más, de ser posible, al desorden de mi instalación. El caucho, tirado por el suelo, mezclaba su jugo con los melones de la selva, las dulzonas papayas con sabor a peras orinadas, cuyo recuerdo, quince años después, de tantas como jalé en lugar de las judías, aún me da asco.

Intentaba hacerme idea del nivel de impotencia en el que había caído, pero no lo lograba. «¡Todo el mundo roba!», me había repetido por tres veces Robinson, antes de desaparecer. Ésa era también la opinión del delegado general. Con la fiebre, esas palabras me obsesionaban. «¡Tienes que espabilarte!»… me había dicho también Robinson. Intentaba levantarme. Tampoco lo conseguía. Sobre lo del agua de beber, tenía razón, lodo era; peor, posos. Unos negritos me traían muchos plátanos, grandes y pequeños, y naranjas sanguinas y siempre aquellas «papayas», pero, ¡me dolía tanto el vientre con todo aquello y con todo! Habría podido vomitar la tierra entera.

En cuanto notaba un poco de mejoría, me sentía menos atontado, el abominable miedo volvía a apoderarse de mí por entero, el de tener que rendir cuentas a la Sociedad Porduriére. ¿Qué iba a decir, a aquella gente maléfica? ¿Me creerían? Me mandarían detener, ¡seguro! ¿Quién me juzgaría, entonces? Tipos especiales, armados de leyes terribles, sacadas de quién sabe dónde, como el consejo de guerra, pero cuyas verdaderas intenciones nunca te comunican y que se divierten haciéndote escalar con ellas a cuestas, sangrando, el sendero a pico por encima del infierno, el camino que conduce a los pobres al hoyo. La ley es el gran Parque de Atracciones del dolor.

Cuando el pelagatos se deja atrapar por ella, se le oye aún gritar siglos y más siglos después.

Prefería quedarme pasmado allí, temblando, babeando con los 40º, que verme forzado, lúcido, a imaginar lo que me esperaba en Fort-Gono. Llegó un momento en que ya no tomaba quinina para dejar que la fiebre me ocultara la vida. Te embriagas con lo que puedes. Mientras me cocía así, a fuego lento, durante días y semanas, se me acabaron las cerillas. Robinson no me había dejado otra cosa que fabada «estilo de Burdeos». Ahora que de ésta me dejó la tira, la verdad. Vomité latas enteras. Y, para llegar a ese resultado, aún había que calentarlas.

Esa penuria de cerillas me proporcionó una pequeña distracción, la de contemplar a mi cocinero encender el fuego con dos piedras en eslabón y hierbas secas. Al verlo hacer así, se me ocurrió hacer lo mismo. Además, tenía mucha fiebre y la idea cobró singular consistencia. Pese a ser torpe por naturaleza, tras una semana de aplicación, también yo sabía, igualito que un negro, prender el fuego entre dos piedras puntiagudas. En una palabra, empezaba a espabilarme en el estado primitivo. El fuego es lo principal; luego queda la caza, pero yo no tenía ambición. El fuego del sílex me bastaba. Me ejercitaba concienzudo. Sólo tenía eso que hacer, día tras día. En el juego de rechazar las orugas del «secundario» no había adquirido tanta habilidad. Aún no había aprendido el truco. Aplastaba muchas orugas. Perdía interés. Las dejaba entrar con libertad en mi choza, como amigas. Se produjeron dos grandes tormentas sucesivas, la segunda duró tres días enteros y, sobre todo, tres

noches. Por fin pude beber agua de lluvia en el bidón, tibia, claro, pero en fin… Bajo los aguaceros las telas en existencia empezaron a deshacerse, sin remedio, mezclándose unas con otras, mercancía inmunda.

Negros serviciales me fueron a buscar, muy dentro de la selva, manojos de lianas para amarrar mi choza al suelo, pero en vano, el follaje de las mamparas, al menor soplo de viento, se ponía a batir enloquecido, por encima del techo, como alas heridas. No hubo solución. Todo por divertirse, en suma.

Los negros, pequeños y grandes, decidieron vivir en mi ruina con total familiaridad. Estaban joviales. Gran distracción. Entraban y salían de mi casa (si así podemos llamarla) como Pedro por la suya. Libertad. Nos entendíamos por señas. Si no hubiera tenido fiebre, tal vez me habría puesto a aprender su lengua. Me faltó tiempo. En cuanto al encendido con piedras, pese a mis progresos, aún no había adquirido su mejor estilo, el expeditivo. Aún me saltaban muchas chispas a los ojos y eso hacía reír mucho a los negros.

Cuando no estaba enmoheciendo de fiebre en mi «plegable» o dándole al mechero primitivo, no pensaba sino en las cuentas de la Porduriére. Es curioso lo que cuesta liberarse del terror a la irregularidad en las cuentas. Desde luego, ese terror debía de venirme de mi madre, que me había contaminado con su tradición: «Primero robas un huevo… y después un talego y acabas asesinando a tu madre.» De esas cosas nos cuesta a todos mucho liberarnos. Las hemos aprendido siendo demasiado pequeños y acuden a aterrarnos, más adelante, en los momentos decisivos. ¡Qué debilidades! Sólo podemos contar, para librarnos de ellas, con las circunstancias. Por fortuna, son imperiosas, las circunstancias. Entretanto, nos hundíamos, la factoría y yo. Íbamos a desaparecer en el barro tras cada aguacero más viscoso, más espeso. La estación de las lluvias. Lo que ayer parecía una roca hoy no era sino melaza pastosa. Desde las ramas balanceantes el agua tibia te perseguía en cascadas, se derramaba por la choza y los alrededores, como en el lecho de un antiguo río abandonado. Todo se fundía en papilla de baratijas, esperanzas y cuentas y en la fiebre también, húmeda también. Aquella lluvia tan densa, que te cerraba la boca, cuando te agredía, como con una mordaza tibia. Aquel diluvio no impedía a los animales seguir persiguiéndose, los ruiseñores se pusieron a hacer tanto ruido como los chacales. La anarquía por todos lados y en el arca, yo, Noé, medio lelo. Me pareció llegado el momento de poner fin a aquella vida.

Mi madre no sabía sólo refranes sobre la honradez; también decía, recordé oportunamente, cuando quemaba en casa las vendas viejas: «¡El fuego lo purifica todo!» Encuentras de todo en casa de tu madre, para todas las ocasiones del destino. Basta con saber escoger.

Llegó el momento. Mis sílex no eran los más apropiados, sin punta suficiente, la mayoría de las chispas se me quedaban en las manos. Aun así, al fin las primeras mercancías prendieron pese a la humedad. Se trataba de una provisión de calcetines absolutamente empapados. Era después de la puesta del sol. Las llamas se elevaron rápidas, fogosas. Los indígenas de la aldea acudieron a agruparse en torno al fogón, parloteando con furia de cotorras. El caucho en bruto que había comprado Robinson chisporroteaba en el centro y su olor me recordaba invariablemente el célebre incendio de la Compañía Telefónica, en Quai de Grenelle, que fui a ver con mi tío Charles, quien tan bien cantaba romanzas. Era el año antes de la Exposición, la Grande, cuando yo era aún muy pequeño. Nada fuerza a los recuerdos a aparecer como los olores y las llamas. Mi choza, por su parte, olía exactamente igual. Pese a estar empapada, ardió enterita, con mercancías y todo. Ya estaban hechas las cuentas. La selva calló por una vez. Completo silencio. Debían de estar deslumbrados búhos, leopardos, sapos y papagayos. Es lo que necesitan para quedarse pasmados. Como nosotros con la guerra. Ahora la selva podía volver a apoderarse de los restos bajo su alud de hojas. Yo sólo había salvado mi modesto equipaje, la cama plegable, los trescientos francos y, por supuesto, algunas fabadas, ¡qué remedio!, para el camino.

Tras una hora de incendio, ya no quedaba nada de mi edículo. Algunas pavesas bajo la lluvia y algunos negros incoherentes que hurgaban las cenizas con la punta de la lanza en medio de tufaradas de ese olor fiel a todas las miserias, olor desprendido de todos los desastres de este mundo, el olor a pólvora humeante.

Ya era hora de largarme a escape. ¿Regresar a Fort-Gono? ¿Intentar explicarles mi conducta y las circunstancias de aquella aventura? Vacilé… Por poco tiempo. No hay que explicar nada. El mundo sólo sabe matarte como un durmiente, cuando se vuelve, el mundo, hacia ti, igual que un durmiente se mata las pulgas. La verdad es que sería una muerte muy tonta, me dije, como la de todo el mundo, vamos. Confiar en los hombres es dejarse matar un poco.

Pese al estado en que me encontraba, decidí internarme por la selva en la dirección que había seguido aquel Robinson de mis desdichas.

Por el camino, seguí escuchando con frecuencia a los animales de la selva, con sus quejas, trémolos y llamadas, pero casi nunca los veía, excepto un cochinillo salvaje al que en cierta ocasión estuve a punto de pisar cerca de mi abrigo. Por aquellas ráfagas de gritos, llamadas, aullidos, era como para pensar que estaban muy cerca, centenares, millares, hormigueando, los animales. Sin embargo, en cuanto te acercabas al lugar de que partía el jaleo, ni uno, excepto enormes pintadas azules, enredadas en su plumaje como para una boda y tan torpes, que, cuando saltaban tosiendo de una rama a otra, parecía que acababa de ocurrirles un accidente.

Más abajo, en el moho de la maleza, mariposas enormes y pesadas, y ribeteadas como «esquelas», temblequeaban sin poder abrirse y, más abajo aún, íbamos nosotros, chapoteando en el barro amarillo. Avanzábamos a duras penas, sobre todo porque los negros me llevaban en parihuelas, hechas con sacos cosidos por los extremos. Habrían podido muy bien tirarme a la pañí, los porteadores, mientras cruzábamos un brazo de río. ¿Por qué no lo hicieron? Más adelante lo supe. ¿O por qué no se me jalaron, ya que entraba

dentro de sus costumbres?

De vez en cuando, les hacía preguntas con voz pastosa, a aquellos compañeros, y siempre me respondían: sí, sí. Bastante complacientes, en una palabra. Buena gente. Cuando la diarrea me dejaba un respiro, volvía a ser presa de la fiebre al instante. Era increíble lo enfermo que había llegado a estar con aquella vida.

Incluso empezaba a no ver claro o, mejor dicho, veía todo en verde. Por la noche, cuando todos los animales de la tierra acudían a acechar nuestro campamento, encendíamos un fuego. Y aquí y allá un grito atravesaba, pese a todo, el enorme toldo negro que nos asfixiaba. Un animal degollado que, pese a su horror de los hombres y del fuego, acudía a quejarse ante nosotros, allí, muy cerca.

A partir del cuarto día, dejé incluso de intentar reconocer lo real de entre las cosas absurdas de la fiebre que entraban en mi cabeza unas dentro de otras, al tiempo que trozos de personas y, además, retazos de resoluciones y desesperaciones sin fin.

Pero, aun así, debió de existir, me digo hoy, cuando lo pienso, aquel blanco barbudo que encontramos una mañana sobre un promontorio de piedras en la confluencia de los dos ríos. Y, además, se oía, muy cerca, el estruendo de una catarata. Era un tipo del estilo de Alcide, pero en sargento español. Acabábamos de pasar, a fuerza de ir de un sendero a otro, así, mal que bien a la colonia de Río del Río, antigua posesión de la Corona de Castilla. Aquel español, pobre militar, poseía una choza también él. Se rió con ganas, me parece, cuando le conté todas mis desgracias y lo que había hecho yo con mi choza. La suya, cierto es, se presentaba un poco mejor, pero no mucho. Su tormento especial eran las hormigas rojas. Habían elegido su choza para pasar, en su migración anual, las muy putas, y no cesaban de cruzarla desde hacía casi dos meses.

Ocupaban casi todo el sitio; costaba moverse y, además, si las molestabas, picaban fuerte.

Se puso muy contento cuando le di mi fabada, pues él sólo comía tomate, desde hacía tres años. No hacía falta que me contara. Ya había consumido, me dijo, más de tres mil latas él solo. Cansado de aderezarlo de diferentes formas, ahora lo sorbía, de la forma más sencilla del mundo: por dos pequeños orificios practicados en la tapa, como si se tratara de huevos.

Las hormigas rojas, en cuanto se enteraron de que había nuevas conservas, montaron guardia en torno a sus fabadas. Había que tener cuidado de no dejar tirada una sola lata, abierta, pues en ese caso habrían hecho entrar a la raza entera de las hormigas rojas en la choza. No hay mayor comunista. Y se habrían jalado también al español.

Me enteré por aquel anfitrión de que la capital de Río del Río se llamaba San Tapeta, ciudad y puerto célebre en toda la costa e incluso más lejos, porque allí se armaban las galeras para travesías largas.

La pista que seguíamos conducía allí precisamente, era el camino bueno, bastaba con continuar así durante tres días más y tres noches. Pregunté a aquel español si no conocía por casualidad alguna buena medicina indígena que pudiera apañarme. La cabeza me atormentaba atrozmente. Pero él no quería ni oír hablar de esos mejunjes. Para ser un español colonizador, era sorprendentemente africanófobo, hasta el punto de que se negaba a utilizar en el retrete, cuando iba, hojas de plátano y tenía a su disposición, cortados para ese uso, toda una pila de ejemplares del *Boletín de Asturias,* expresamente. Tampoco leía ya el periódico, exactamente igual que Alcide también.

Hacía tres años que vivía allí, solo con las hormigas, algunas manías y sus periódicos viejos, y también con ese terrible acento español, que es como una especie de segunda persona, de tan fuerte que es; costaba mucho excitarlo. Cuando abroncaba a sus negros, era como una tormenta, por ejemplo. A mala hostia, Alcide no le llegaba ni a la altura del betún. Tanto me gustaba, aquel español, que acabé cediéndole toda mi fabada. Como prueba de agradecimiento, me extendió un pasaporte muy bello sobre papel granuloso con las armas de Castilla y una firma tan labrada, que para su minuciosa ejecución tardó diez buenos minutos.

Para San Tapeta, no podíamos perdernos, pues; estaba en lo cierto, había que seguir todo recto. Ya no sé cómo llegamos, pero de una cosa estoy seguro, y es que, nada más llegar, me pusieron en manos de un cura, tan chocho, me pareció, que de notarlo a mi lado sentí una especie de ánimo comparativo. No por mucho tiempo.

La ciudad de San Tapeta se alzaba en el flanco de una roca y justo enfrente del mar y era de un verde, que había que verlo para creerlo. Un espectáculo magnífico, seguramente, visto desde la ensenada, algo suntuoso, de lejos, pero de cerca sólo carnes exhaustas como en Fort-Gono, permanentemente cubiertas de pústulas y achicharradas. En cuanto a los negros de mi pequeña caravana, en un breve instante de lucidez los despedí. Habían atravesado una gran extensión de selva y temían por su vida al regreso, según decían. Lloraban ya de antemano, al despedirse de mí, pero a mí me faltaban fuerzas para compadecerlos. Había sufrido y transpirado demasiado. Sin fin.

Por lo que puedo recordar, muchos seres cacareantes, que, por lo visto, abundaban en aquella población, vinieron día y noche a partir de aquel momento a ajetrearse en torno a mi lecho, que habían instalado especialmente en el presbiterio, pues las distracciones eran escasas en San Tapeta. El cura me atiborraba de tisanas, una larga cruz dorada oscilaba sobre su vientre y de las profundidades de su sotana subía, cuando se acercaba a mi cabecera, gran tintineo de monedas. Pero no había ni que pensar en conversar con aquella gente, el simple hecho de farfullar me agotaba más de lo imaginable.

Estaba convencido de que era el fin, intenté mirar aún un poco lo que podía distinguir de este mundo por la ventana del cura. No me atrevería a afirmar que pueda hoy describir aquellos jardines sin cometer errores groseros y fantásticos. Sol había, eso seguro, siempre el mismo, como si te abriesen una amplia caldera

siempre en plena cara y luego, debajo, más sol y unos árboles disparatados y también paseos, con árboles que parecían lechugas tan desarrolladas como robles y una especie de cardillos, tres o cuatro de los cuales bastarían para hacer un hermoso castaño corriente de los de Europa. Añádase un sapo o dos al montón, del tamaño de podencos, saltando desesperados de un macizo a otro.

Por los olores es como acaban las personas, los países y las cosas. Todas las aventuras se van por la nariz. Cerré los ojos, porque, la verdad, ya no podía abrirlos. Entonces el acre olor de África, noche tras noche, se esfumó. Llegó a serme cada vez más difícil percibir su tufo, mezcla de tierra muerta, entrepiernas y azafrán machacado.

Pasó tiempo, volvió el pasado, y más tiempo aún y después llegó un momento en que sufrí varios choques y nuevas revulsiones y después sacudidas más regulares, como en una cuna…

Acostado seguía, desde luego, pero sobre una materia en movimiento. Me dejaba llevar y después vomitaba y volvía a despertarme y me dormía otra vez. Estaba en el mar. Tan molido me sentía, que apenas tenía fuerzas para conservar el nuevo olor a jarcias y alquitrán. Hacía frío en el rincón marinero donde me encontraba apretujado justo bajo un ojo de buey abierto de par en par. Me habían dejado solo. El viaje continuaba, evidentemente… Pero, ¿cuál? Oía pasos por el puente, un puente de madera, por encima de mi cabeza, y voces y las olas que venían a chapotear y romper contra la borda.

Es muy raro que la vida vuelva a tu cabecera, estés donde estés, si no es en forma de putada. La que me había hecho aquella gente de San Tapeta era de aúpa. ¡Pues no habían aprovechado mi estado para venderme, alelado como estaba, al patrón de una galera! Una hermosa galera, la verdad, de bordas altas y con muchos remos, coronada con bonitas velas purpúreas, un castillo dorado, un barco de lo más acolchado en los lugares destinados a los oficiales, con un soberbio cuadro en la proa pintado con aceite de hígado de bacalao y que representaba a la *Infanta Combitta* en traje de polo. Según me explicaron más adelante, aquella Alteza patrocinaba, con su nombre, sus chuchais y su honor real, el navío que nos llevaba. Era halagador.

Al fin y al cabo, meditaba a propósito de mi aventura, si me hubiera quedado en San Tapeta, aún estoy enfermo como un perro, la cabeza me da vueltas, seguro que habría cascado en casa de aquel cura, donde me habían dejado los negros… ¿Volver a Fort-Gono? En ese caso no me libraba de mis «quince años» por lo de las cuentas… Allí al menos estaba en movimiento y ya eso era una esperanza… Pensándolo bien, aquel capitán de la *Infanta Combitta* había tenido audacia al comprarme, aun a bajo precio, al cura en el momento de levar anclas. Arriesgaba todo su dinero en aquella transacción, el capitán. Podría haberlo perdido todo. Había especulado con la acción benéfica del aire del mar para reanimarme. Merecía su recompensa. Iba a ganar, pues ya me encontraba mejor y lo veía muy contento por ello. Aún deliraba mucho, pero con cierta lógica… A partir del momento en que abrí los ojos, vino con frecuencia a visitarme a mi cuchitril y engalanado con su sombrero de plumas. Así me parecía.

Se divertía mucho al verme alzarme sobre el jergón, pese a la fiebre, que no me abandonaba. Vomitaba. «Vamos, mierdica, ¡pronto podrás remar con los demás!», me predijo. Era muy amable por su parte y se reía a carcajadas, al tiempo que me daba ligeros latigazos, pero entonces muy amistosos, y en la nuca, no en las nalgas. Quería que me divirtiera yo también, que me alegrase con él del espléndido negocio que acababa de hacer al adquirirme.

La comida de a bordo me pareció muy aceptable. Yo no cesaba de farfullar. Rápido, como había previsto el capitán, recuperé fuerzas suficientes para ir a remar de vez en cuando con los compañeros. Pero donde había diez, de éstos, yo veía cien: la alucinación.

Nos fatigábamos bastante poco durante aquella travesía, porque la mayoría del tiempo navegábamos a vela. Nuestra condición en el entrepuente no era más nauseabunda que la de los viajeros corrientes de clase baja en un vagón de domingo y menos peligrosa que la que había soportado en el *Amiral-Bragueton.* Tuvimos siempre mucha ventilación durante aquel paso del Este al Oeste del Atlántico. La temperatura bajó. En los entrepuentes nadie se quejaba. Nos parecía tan sólo un poco largo. Por mi parte, me había hartado de espectáculos del mar y de la selva para una eternidad.

Me habría gustado preguntar detalles al capitán sobre los fines y los medios de nuestra navegación, pero desde que me encontraba mejor había dejado de interesarse por mi suerte. Además, yo desatinaba demasiado para una conversación, la verdad. Ya sólo lo veía de lejos, como a un patrón de verdad.

A bordo, me puse a buscar a Robinson entre los galeotes y en varias ocasiones durante la noche, en pleno silencio, lo llamé en alta voz. No hubo respuesta, salvo algunas injurias y amenazas: la chusma.

Sin embargo, cuanto más pensaba en los detalles y las circunstancias de mi aventura, más probable me parecía que le hubieran hecho también a él la faena de San Tapeta. Sólo que Robinson debía de remar ahora en otra galera. Los negros de la selva debían de estar todos metidos en el comercio y el chanchullo. A cada cual su turno, era normal. Tienes que vivir y coger para vender las cosas y las personas que no vayas a comer enseguida. La relativa amabilidad de los indígenas hacia mí se explicaba del modo más indecente.

La *Infanta Combitta* siguió navegando semanas y más semanas por entre el oleaje atlántico, de mareo en acceso, y después una noche todo se calmó a nuestro alrededor. Yo había dejado de delirar. Estábamos balanceándonos en torno al ancla. El día siguiente, al despertarnos, comprendimos, al abrir los ojos de buey, que acabábamos de llegar a nuestro destino. ¡Era un espectáculo morrocotudo!

¡Menuda sorpresa! Por entre la bruma, era tan asombroso lo que descubríamos de pronto, que al principio nos negamos a creerlo, pero luego, cuando nos encontramos a huevo delante de aquello, por muy galeotes que

fuéramos, nos entró un cachondeo de la leche, al verlo, vertical ante nosotros…

Figuraos que estaba de pie, la ciudad aquella, absolutamente vertical. Nueva York es una ciudad de pie. Ya habíamos visto la tira de ciudades, claro está, y bellas, además, y puertos y famosos incluso. Pero en nuestros pagos, verdad, están acostadas, las ciudades, al borde del mar o a la orilla de ríos, se extienden sobre el paisaje, esperan al viajero, mientras que aquélla, la americana, no se despatarraba, no, se mantenía bien estirada, ahí, nada cachonda, estirada como para asustar.

Conque nos cachondeamos como lelos. Hace gracia, por fuerza, una ciudad construida vertical. Pero sólo podíamos cachondearnos del espectáculo, nosotros, del cuello para arriba, por el frío que en aquel momento venía de alta mar a través de una densa bruma gris y rosa, rápida y penetrante, al asalto de nuestros pantalones y de las grietas de aquella muralla, las calles de la ciudad, donde las nubes se precipitaban también, empujadas por el viento. Nuestra galera dejaba su leve estela justo al ras de la escollera, donde iba a desembocar un agua color caca, que no dejaba de chapotear con una sarta de barquillas y remolcadores ávidos y cornudos.

Para un pelagatos nunca es cómodo desembarcar en ninguna parte, pero para un galeote es mucho peor aún, sobre todo porque los americanos no aprecian lo más mínimo a los galeotes procedentes de Europa. «Son todos unos anarquistas», dicen. En una palabra, sólo quieren recibir en sus tierras a los curiosos que les aporten parné, porque todos los dineros de Europa son hijos de Dólar.

Tal vez podría haber intentado, como otros lo habían logrado ya, atravesar el puerto a nado y después, una vez en el muelle, ponerme a gritar: «¡Viva Dólar! ¡Viva Dólar!» Es un buen truco. Mucha gente ha desembarcado de ese modo y después han hecho fortuna. No es seguro, es lo que cuentan sólo. En los sueños ocurren cosas peores. Yo tenía otro plan en la cabeza, además de la fiebre.

Como había aprendido en la galera a contar bien las pulgas (no sólo a atraparlas, sino también a sumarlas, a restarlas, en una palabra, a hacer estadísticas), oficio delicado, que parece cosa de nada, pero constituye toda una técnica, quería aprovecharlo. Los americanos serán lo que sean, pero en materia de técnica son unos entendidos. Les iba a gustar con locura mi forma de contar las pulgas, estaba seguro por adelantado. No podía fallar, en mi opinión.

Iba a ir a ofrecerles mis servicios, cuando, de pronto, dieron orden a nuestra galera de ir a pasar cuarentena en una ensenada contigua, al abrigo, a tiro de piedra de un pueblecito reservado, en el fondo de una bahía tranquila, a dos millas al Este de Nueva York.

Y nos quedamos allí, todos, en observación durante semanas y semanas, hasta el punto de que fuimos adquiriendo hábitos. Así, todas las noches, después del rancho el equipo de aprovisionamiento bajaba del barco para ir al pueblo. Para lograr mis fines tenía que formar parte de aquel equipo.

Los compañeros sabían perfectamente lo que me proponía, pero a ellos no los tentaba la aventura. «Está loco -decían-, pero no es peligroso.» En la *Infanta Combitta* no se comía mal, les daban algún palo que otro, pero no demasiados; en una palabra, podía pasar. Era un currelo aceptable. Y, además, ventaja sublime, nunca los echaban de la galera y hasta les había prometido el Rey, para cuando tuvieran sesenta y dos años, un pequeño retiro. Esa perspectiva los hacía felices, así tenían algo con lo que soñar y, encima, el domingo, para sentirse libres, jugaban a votar.

Durante las semanas en que nos impusieron la cuarentena, gritaban todos juntos como descosidos en el entrepuente, se peleaban y se daban por culo también por turno. Y, en definitiva, lo que les impedía escapar conmigo era sobre todo que no querían ni oír hablar ni saber nada de aquella América, que a mí me apasionaba. Cada cual con sus monstruos y para ellos América era el Coco. Incluso intentaron asquearme por completo. En vano les decía que tenía amigos en aquel país, mi querida Lola entre otros, quien debía de ser muy rica ahora, y, además, el Robinson, seguramente, que debía de haberse hecho una posición en los negocios, no querían dar su brazo a torcer y seguían con su aversión hacia Estados Unidos, su asco, su odio: «Siempre serás un chiflado», me decían. Un día hice como que iba con ellos a la fuente del pueblo y después les dije que no volvía a la galera. ¡Agur!

Eran buenos chavales, en el fondo, buenos trabajadores y me repitieron una vez más que no lo aprobaban, pero, aun así, me desearon ánimo, suerte y felicidad, pero a su manera. «¡Anda! – me dijeron-. ¡Ve! Pero luego no digas que no te hemos avisado: para ser un piojoso, ¡tienes gustos raros! ¡Estás majareta de la fiebre! ¡Ya volverás de tu América y en un estado peor que el nuestro! ¡Tus gustos van a ser tu perdición! ¿Qué quieres aprender? ¡Ya sabes demasiado para ser lo que eres!»

En vano les respondía que tenía amigos allí y que me esperaban. Como si hablara en chino.

«¿Amigos? – decían-. ¿Amigos? Pero, ¡si les importas tres cojones a tus amigos! ¡Hace mucho que te han olvidado, tus amigos!…»

«Pero, ¡es que quiero ver a los americanos! – les repetía en vano-. Y, además, ¡mujeres como las de aquí no se encuentran en ninguna parte!…»

«¡No seas chorra y vuelve con nosotros! – me respondían-. ¿No ves que no vale la pena? ¡Te vas a poner más enfermo de lo que estás! ¡Te lo vamos a decir ahora mismo, nosotros, lo que son los americanos! ¡O millonarios o muertos de hambre! ¡No hay término medio! ¡Seguro que no los vas a ver tú, a los millonarios, en el estado en que llegas! Pero con los muertos de hambre, ¡te vas a enterar tú de lo que vale un peine! ¡Descuida! ¡Y en seguidita!…»

Para que veáis cómo me trataron, los compañeros. Al final, me horripilaban todos, unos frustrados,

soplapollas, subhombres. «¡Iros a tomar por culo todos! – fui y les respondí-. ¡Lo que pasa es que os morís de envidia! ¡Ya lo veremos eso de que los americanos me van a dar para el pelo! Pero, ¡lo que es seguro es que todos vosotros tenéis menos cojones que un pajarito!»

¡Para que se enteraran! Entonces, ¡me quedé a gusto!

Como caía la noche, les silbaron desde la galera. Se pusieron otra vez a remar todos a compás, menos uno, yo. Esperé hasta que no se los oyera, pero es que nada, después conté hasta cien y entonces corrí con todas mis fuerzas hasta el pueblo. Era un sitio muy mono, el pueblo, bien iluminado, con casas de madera, que esperaban a que te sirvieses, dispuestas a derecha e izquierda de una capilla, en completo silencio también, sólo que yo era presa de escalofríos, el paludismo y, además, el miedo. Por aquí y por allá, te encontrabas un marino de aquella guarnición, que no parecía apurarse, e incluso niños y luego una niña de lo más musculosa: ¡América! Yo había llegado. Eso es lo que da gusto ver tras tantas aventuras amargas. Te vuelven las ganas de vivir, como al comer fruta. Había ido a parar al único pueblo que no servía para nada. Una pequeña guarnición de familias de marinos lo mantenía en buen estado con todas sus instalaciones para el posible día en que llegara una peste feroz en un barco como el nuestro y amenazase al gran puerto.

Sería en aquellas instalaciones en las que harían cascar al mayor número posible de extranjeros para que los otros de la ciudad no se contagiaran. Tenían incluso un cementerio muy mono preparado en las cercanías y todo cubierto de flores. Esperaban. Hacía sesenta años que esperaban, no hacían otra cosa que esperar.

Encontré una pequeña cabaña vacía y me colé en ella y al instante me quedé dormido y desde por la mañana no se veía otra cosa que marineros por las callejuelas, con traje corto, cuadrados y bien plantados, cosa fina, dándole a la escoba *y* al cubo de agua en torno a mi refugio y por todas las encrucijadas de aquel pueblo teórico. De nada me sirvió aparentar indiferencia, tenía tanta hambre, que, pese a todo, me acerqué a un lugar en que olía a cocina.

Allí fue donde me descubrieron y arrinconaron entre dos escuadrones decididos a identificarme. En seguida se habló de lanzarme al agua. Cuando me llevaron por el conducto más rápido ante el Director de la Cuarentena, no me llegaba la camisa al cuerpo y, aunque la constante adversidad me había enseñado el desparpajo, me sentía aún demasiado embebido por la fiebre como para arriesgarme a una improvisación brillante. No, me puse a divagar y sin convicción.

Más valía perder el conocimiento. Eso fue lo que me ocurrió. En su despacho, donde más tarde lo recobré, unas damas vestidas de colores claros habían substituido a los hombres a mi alrededor y me sometieron a un interrogatorio vago y benévolo, con el que me habría contentado de muy buena gana. Pero ninguna indulgencia dura en este mundo y el día siguiente mismo los hombres se pusieron a hablarme de nuevo de la cárcel. Aproveché, por mi parte, para hablarles de pulgas, así, como quien no quiere la cosa… Que si sabía atraparlas… Contarlas… Que si era mi especialidad, y también agrupar esos parásitos en auténticas estadísticas. Veía perfectamente que mis actitudes les interesaban, les hacían poner mala cara, a mis guardianes. Me escuchaban. Pero de eso a creerme iba un trecho largo.

Por fin, apareció el comandante del puesto en persona. Se llamaba «Surgeon General», lo que no estaría mal de nombre para un pez. Se mostró grosero, pero más decidido que los otros. «¿Cómo dices, muchacho? – me dijo-. ¿Que sabes contar las pulgas? ¡Vaya, vaya!…» Se creía que me iba a confundir con un vacile así. Pero le devolví la pelota recitándole el pequeño alegato que había preparado. «¡Yo creo en el censo de las pulgas! Es un factor de civilización, porque el censo es la base de un material de estadística de los más preciosos… Un país progresista debe conocer el número de sus pulgas, clasificadas por sexos, grupos de edad, años y estaciones…»

«¡Vamos, vamos! ¡Basta de palabras, joven! – me cortó el Surgeon General-. Antes que tú, ya han venido aquí muchos otros vivales de Europa, que nos han contado patrañas de esa clase, pero, en definitiva, eran unos anarquistas como los otros, peor que los otros… ¡Ya ni siquiera creían en la Anarquía! ¡Basta de fanfarronadas!… Mañana te pondremos a prueba con los emigrantes de ahí enfrente, en la Ellis Island, ¡en el servicio de duchas! El doctor Mischief, mi ayudante, me dirá si mientes. Hace dos meses que el Sr. Mischief me pide un agente "cuentapulgas". ¡Vas a ir con él de prueba! ¡Ya puedes dar media vuelta! Y si nos has engañado, ¡te tiraremos al agua! ¡Media vuelta! ¡Y mucho ojo!»

Supe dar media vuelta ante aquella autoridad americana, como lo había hecho ante tantas otras autoridades, es decir, presentándole primero la verga y después el trasero, tras haber girado, ágil, en semicírculo, todo ello acompañado del saludo militar.

Pensé que ese método de las estadísticas debía de ser tan bueno como cualquier otro para acercarme a Nueva York. El día siguiente mismo, Mischief, el médico militar de marras, me puso en pocas palabras al corriente de mi servicio; grueso y amarillento era aquel hombre y miope con avaricia y, además, llevaba enormes gafas ahumadas. Debía de reconocerme por el modo como los animales salvajes reconocen su caza, por el aspecto general, porque lo que es por los detalles era imposible con gafas como las que llevaba.

Nos entendimos sin problemas en relación con el currelo y creo incluso que, hacia el final de mi período de prueba, Mischief me tenía mucha simpatía. No verse es ya una buena razón para simpatizar y, además, sobre todo mi extraordinaria habilidad para atrapar las pulgas lo seducía. No había otro como yo en todo el puesto, para encerrarlas en cajas, las más rebeldes, las más queratinizadas, las más impacientes; era capaz de seleccionarlas según el sexo sobre el propio emigrante. Era un trabajo estupendo, puedo asegurarlo… Mischief había acabado fiándose por entero de mi destreza.

Hacia la noche, a fuerza de aplastar pulgas, tenía las uñas del pulgar y del índice magulladas y, sin embargo, no había acabado con mi tarea, ya que me faltaba aún lo más importante, ordenar por columnas los datos de su filiación: pulgas de Polonia, por una parte, de Yugoslavia… de España… Ladillas de Crimea… Sarnas de Perú… Todo lo que viaja, furtivo y picador, sobre la humanidad me pasaba por las uñas. Era, como se ve, una obra a la vez monumental y meticulosa. Las sumas se hacían en Nueva York, en un servicio especial dotado de máquinas eléctricas cuentapulgas. Todos los días, el pequeño remolcador de la Cuarentena atravesaba la ensenada de un extremo a otro para llevar allí nuestras sumas por hacer o por verificar.

Así pasaron días y días, recobraba un poco la salud, pero, a medida que perdía el delirio y la fiebre en aquella comodidad, recuperé, imperioso, el gusto por la aventura y por nuevas imprudencias. Con 37º todo se vuelve trivial.

Sin embargo, habría podido quedarme allí, tranquilo, para siempre, bien alimentado con la manduca del puesto, y con tanta mayor razón cuanto que la hija del Dr. Mischief, aún la recuerdo, gloriosa en su decimoquinto año, venía, a partir de las cinco, a jugar al tenis, vestida con faldas cortísimas, ante la ventana de nuestra oficina. En punto a piernas, raras veces he visto nada mejor, todavía un poco masculinas y, sin embargo, ya muy delicadas, una belleza de carne en sazón. Una auténtica provocación a la felicidad, promesas como para gritar de gozo. Los jóvenes alféreces del destacamento no la dejaban ni a sol ni a sombra.

¡Los muy bribones no tenían que justificarse como yo con trabajos útiles! Yo no me perdía un detalle de sus manejos en torno a mi idolito. Varias veces al día me hacían palidecer. Acabé diciéndome que por la noche también yo podría pasar tal vez por marino. Acariciaba esas esperanzas, cuando un sábado de la vigésima tercera semana se precipitaron los acontecimientos. El compañero encargado de llevar las estadísticas, un armenio, fue ascendido de improviso a agente cuentapulgas en Alaska para los perros de los prospectores.

Era un ascenso de primera y, por cierto, que él estaba encantado. En efecto, los perros de Alaska son preciosos. Siempre hacen falta. Los cuidan bien. Mientras que los emigrantes importan tres cojones. Siempre hay demasiados.

Como en adelante no teníamos a nadie a mano para llevar las sumas a Nueva York, en la oficina no se andaron con remilgos a la hora de nombrarme a mí. Mischief, mi patrón, me estrechó la mano en el momento de partir, al tiempo que me recomendaba portarme muy bien en la ciudad. Fue el último consejo que me dio, aquel hombre honrado, y no volvió a verme nunca, pero es que nunca. En cuanto llegamos al muelle, una tromba de lluvia empezó a caernos encima y después me caló mi fina chaqueta y me empapó también las estadísticas, que fueron deshaciéndoseme poco a poco en la mano. Sin embargo, me guardé unas pocas con tampón bien grande sobresaliendo del bolsillo para tener aspecto, más o menos, de hombre de negocios en la ciudad y, presa del temor y la emoción, me precipité hacia otras aventuras.

Al alzar la nariz hacia toda aquella muralla, experimenté una especie de vértigo al revés, por las ventanas demasiado numerosas y tan parecidas por todos lados, que daban náuseas.

Vestido precariamente y aterido, me apresuré hacia la hendidura más sombría que se pudiera descubrir en aquella fachada gigantesca, con la esperanza de que los peatones no me viesen apenas entre ellos. Vergüenza superflua. No tenía nada que temer. En la calle que había elegido, la más estrecha de todas, la verdad, no más ancha que un arroyo de nuestros pagos, y bien mugrienta en el fondo, bien húmeda, llena de tinieblas, caminaban ya tantos otros, pequeños y grandes, que me llevaron consigo como una sombra. Subían como yo a la ciudad, hacia el currelo seguramente, con la nariz gacha. Eran los pobres de todas partes.

Como si supiera adonde iba, hice como que elegía otra vez y cambié de camino, seguí a mi derecha otra calle, mejor iluminada, Broadway se llamaba. El nombre lo leí en una placa. Muy por encima de los últimos pisos, arriba, estaba la luz del día junto con gaviotas y pedazos de cielo. Nosotros avanzábamos en la luz de abajo, enferma como la de la selva y tan gris, que la calle estaba llena de ella, como un gran amasijo de algodón sucio. Era como una herida triste, la calle, que no acababa nunca, con nosotros al fondo, de un lado al otro, de una pena a otra, hacia el extremo fin, que no se ve nunca, el fin de todas las calles del mundo.

No pasaban coches, sólo gente y más gente todavía.

Era el barrio precioso, me explicaron más adelante, el barrio del oro: Manhattan. Sólo se entra a pie, como a la iglesia. Es el corazón mismo, en Banco, del mundo de hoy. Sin embargo, hay quienes escupen al suelo al pasar. Hay que ser atrevido.

Es un barrio lleno de oro, un auténtico milagro, y hasta se puede oír el milagro, a través de las puertas, con el ruido de dólares estrujados, el siempre tan ligero, el Dólar, auténtico Espíritu Santo, más precioso que la sangre.

De todos modos, tuve tiempo de ir a verlos e incluso hablarles, a aquellos empleados que guardaban la liquidez. Son tristes y están mal pagados.

Cuando los fieles entran en su Banco, no hay que creer que puedan servirse así como así, a capricho. En absoluto. Hablan a Dólar susurrándole cosas a través de una rejilla, se confiesan, vamos. Poco ruido, luces indirectas, una ventanilla minúscula entre altos arcos y se acabó. No se tragan la Hostia. Se la ponen sobre el corazón. No podía quedarme largo rato admirándolos. Tenía que seguir a la gente de la calle entre las paredes de sombra lisa.

De repente, se ensanchó nuestra calle como una grieta que acabara en un estanque de luz. Nos encontramos ante un gran charco de claridad verdosa entre monstruos y monstruos de casas. En el centro de

aquel claro, un pabellón de aire campestre y rodeado de infelices céspedes.

Pregunté a varios vecinos de la muchedumbre qué era aquel edificio que se veía, pero la mayoría fingieron no oírme. No tenían tiempo que perder. Un jovencito que pasaba muy cerca tuvo la gentileza de decirme que era la Alcaldía, antiguo monumento de la época colonial, según añadió, lo único histórico que había… que habían dejado allí… El perímetro de aquel oasis formaba una plaza, con bancos y hasta se estaba muy bien para contemplar la Alcaldía, sentado. No había casi ninguna otra cosa que ver en el momento en que llegué.

Esperé una buena media hora en el mismo sitio y, después, de aquella penumbra, de aquella muchedumbre en marcha, discontinua, taciturna, surgió hacia mediodía, innegable, una brusca avalancha de mujeres absolutamente bellas.

¡Qué descubrimiento! ¡Qué América! ¡Qué arrobamiento! ¡Recuerdo de Lola! ¡Su ejemplo no me había engañado! Era cierto.

Llegaba al centro de mi peregrinaje. Y, si no hubiera sufrido al mismo tiempo las continuas punzadas del hambre, me habría creído en uno de esos momentos de revelación estética sobrenatural. Las bellezas que descubría, incesantes, con un poco de confianza y comodidad me habrían arrebatado a mi condición trivialmente humana. En una palabra, sólo me faltaba un bocadillo para creerme en pleno milagro. Pero, ¡cómo sentía la falta de ese bocadillo!

Sin embargo, ¡qué gracia de movimientos! ¡Qué increíble delicadeza! ¡Qué hallazgos de armonía! ¡Matices peligrosos! ¡Todas las tentaciones más logradas! ¡Todas las promesas posibles del rostro y del cuerpo entre tantas rubias! ¡Y unas morenas! ¡Y qué Ticianos! ¡Y más que se acercaban! ¿Será, pensé, Grecia que renace? ¡Llegaba en el momento oportuno!

Me parecieron tanto más divinas, aquellas apariciones, cuanto que no parecían advertir lo más mínimo que yo existiera, allí, al lado, en aquel banco, completamente lelo, babeante de admiración erótico-mística, de quinina y también de hambre, hay que reconocerlo. Si fuera posible salir de la propia piel, yo habría salido en aquel preciso momento, de una vez por todas. Ya nada me retenía.

Podían transportarme, sublimarme, aquellas modistillas inverosímiles, bastaba con que hicieran un gesto, con que dijesen una palabra y pasaría al instante y por entero al mundo del ensueño, pero seguramente tenían otras misiones que cumplir.

Una hora, dos horas pasé así, presa de la estupefacción. Ya no esperaba nada más.

No hay que olvidar las tripas. ¿Habéis visto la broma que gastan, por nuestros pagos, en el campo a los vagabundos? Les llenan un monedero viejo con las tripas podridas de un pollo. Bueno, pues, un hombre, os lo digo yo, es exactamente igual, sólo que más grande, móvil y voraz y con un sueño dentro.

Había que pensar en las cosas serias, no empezar a gastar en seguida mi pequeña reserva de dinero. No tenía mucho. Ni siquiera me atrevía a contarlo. Por lo demás, no habría podido, veía doble. Me limitaba a palparlos, escasos y tímidos, los billetes, a través de la ropa, en el bolsillo, al alcance de la mano, junto con las estadísticas para el paripé.

También pasaban por allí hombres, jóvenes sobre todo, con cabezas como de palo de rosa, miradas secas y monótonas, mandíbulas nada corrientes, tan grandes, tan bastas… En fin, seguramente así es como sus mujeres las prefieren, las mandíbulas. Los sexos parecían ir cada uno por su lado en la calle. Las mujeres, por su parte, sólo miraban los escaparates de las tiendas, del todo acaparadas por el atractivo de los bolsos, los chales, las cositas de seda, expuestas, pocas a la vez, en cada vitrina, pero de forma precisa, categórica. No aparecían muchos viejos en aquella multitud. Pocas parejas también. A nadie parecía extrañar que yo me quedara allí, solo, parado durante horas, en aquel banco, mirando pasar a todo el mundo. No obstante, en determinado momento, el *policeman* del centro de la calzada, colocado ahí como un tintero, empezó a sospechar que yo tenía proyectos chungos. Era evidente.

Dondequiera que estés, en cuanto llamas la atención de las autoridades, lo mejor es desaparecer y a toda velocidad. Nada de explicaciones. ¡Al agujero!, me dije.

A la derecha de mi banco se abría precisamente un agujero, amplio, en plena acera, del estilo del metro en nuestros pagos. Aquel agujero me pareció propicio, vasto como era, con una escalera dentro toda ella de mármol rosa. Ya había visto a mucha gente de la calle desaparecer en él y después volver a salir. En aquel subterráneo iban a hacer sus necesidades. Me di cuenta en seguida. De mármol también la sala donde se producía la escena. Una especie de piscina, pero vacía, una piscina infecta, ocupada sólo por una luz filtrada, mortecina, que iba a dar allí, sobre los hombres desabrochados en medio de sus olores y rojos como tomates con el esfuerzo de soltar sus porquerías delante de todo el mundo, con ruidos bárbaros.

Entre hombres, así, a la pata la llana, ante las risas de todos los que había alrededor, acompañados por las expresiones de aliento que se dirigían, como en el fútbol. Primero se quitaban la chaqueta, al llegar, como para hacer un ejercicio de fuerza. En una palabra, se ponían el uniforme, era el rito.

Y después, bien despechugados, soltando eructos y cosas peores, gesticulando como en el patio de un manicomio, se instalaban en la caverna fecal. Los recién llegados debían responder a mil bromas asquerosas mientras bajaban los escalones de la calle, pero, aun así, parecían encantados, todos.

Así como arriba, en la acera, mantenían una actitud decorosa, los hombres, y estricta y triste incluso, así también la perspectiva de tener que vaciar las tripas en compañía tumultuosa parecía liberarlos y regocijarlos íntimamente.

Las puertas de los retretes, cubiertas de garabatos, colgaban, arrancadas de los goznes. Se pasaba de una a

otra celda para charlar un poco; los que esperaban a encontrar un sitio libre fumaban puros enormes, al tiempo que daban palmaditas en el hombro al ocupante, en plena faena éste, obstinado, con la cara crispada y cubierta con las manos. Muchos gemían con ganas, como los heridos y las parturientas. A los estreñidos los amenazaban con torturas ingeniosas.

Cuando el sonido de una cadena anunciaba una vacante, redoblaban los clamores en torno al alvéolo libre, cuya posesión se jugaban muchas veces a cara o cruz. Los periódicos, nada más leídos, pese a ser espesos como cojines, eran deshojados al instante por aquella jauría de trabajadores rectales. El humo no dejaba ver las caras. Yo no me atrevía a acercarme demasiado a ellos por sus olores.

Aquel contraste parecía a propósito para desconcertar a un extranjero. Todo aquel despechugamiento íntimo, aquella tremenda familiaridad intestinal, ¡y en la calle una discreción tan perfecta! Yo no salía de mi asombro.

Volví a subir a la luz por las mismas escaleras para descansar en el mismo banco. Repentino desenfreno de digestiones y vulgaridad. Descubrimiento del alegre comunismo de la caca., Dejaba por separado los aspectos tan desconcertantes de la misma aventura. No tenía fuerzas para analizarlos ni realizar su síntesis. Lo que deseaba, imperiosamente, era dormir. ¡Delicioso y raro frenesí!

Conque volví a seguir a la fila de peatones que se adentraban en una de las calles adyacentes y avanzamos a trompicones por culpa de las tiendas, cada uno de cuyos escaparates fragmentaba la multitud. La puerta de un hotel se abría ahí y creaba un gran remolino. La gente salía despedida a la acera por la vasta puerta giratoria y yo me vi engullido en sentido inverso hasta el gran vestíbulo del interior.

Asombroso, antes que nada… Había que adivinarlo todo, imaginar la majestuosidad del edificio, la amplitud de sus proporciones, porque todo sucedía en torno a bombillas tan veladas, que tardabas un tiempo en acostumbrarte.

Muchas mujeres jóvenes en aquella penumbra, hundidas en sillones profundos, como en estuches. Alrededor hombres atentos, pasando y volviendo a pasar, en silencio, a cierta distancia de ellas, curiosos y tímidos, a lo largo de la hilera de piernas cruzadas a magníficas alturas de seda. Me parecían, aquellas maravillosas, esperar allí acontecimientos muy graves y costosos. Evidentemente, no estaban pensando en mí. Así, pues, pasé, a mi vez, ante aquella larga tentación palpable, del modo más furtivo.

Como eran al menos un centenar, aquellas prestigiosas remangadas, dispuestas en una línea única de sillones, llegué a la recepción tan perplejo, tras haber absorbido una ración de belleza tan fuerte para mi temperamento, que iba tambaleándome.

En el mostrador, un dependiente engomado me ofreció con violencia una habitación. Me decidí por la más pequeña del hotel. En aquel momento debía de poseer unos cincuenta dólares, casi ninguna idea y ni la menor confianza.

Esperaba que fuera de verdad la habitación más pequeña de América la que me ofreciese el empleado, pues su hotel, el Laugh Calvin, se anunciaba como el mejor surtido entre los más suntuosos del continente.

Por encima de mí, ¡qué infinito de locales amueblados! Y muy cerca, en aquellos sillones, ¡qué tentación de violaciones en serie! ¡Qué abismos! ¡Qué peligros! Entonces, ¿el suplicio estético del pobre es interminable? ¿Más tenaz aún que su hambre? Pero no tuve tiempo de sucumbir; los de la recepción se habían apresurado a entregarme una llave, que me pesaba en la mano. No me atrevía a moverme.

Un chaval avispado, vestido como un general de brigada muy joven, surgió de la sombra ante mis ojos, imperativo comandante. El lustroso empleado de la recepción pulsó tres veces el timbre metálico y mi chaval se puso a silbar. Me despedían. Era la señal de partida. Nos largamos.

Primero, por un pasillo, a buen paso, íbamos negros y decididos como un metro. Él conducía, el muchacho. Otra esquina, una vuelta y luego otra. Perdiendo el culo. Curvamos un poco nuestra trayectoria. Y pasamos. Ahí estaba el ascensor. Aspirados. ¿Ya estábamos? No. Otro pasillo. Más sombrío aún, ébano mural, me pareció, en todas las paredes. No tuve tiempo de examinarlo. El chaval silbaba, cargaba con mi ligera maleta. Yo no me atrevía a preguntarle nada. Había que avanzar, me daba cuenta perfectamente. En las tinieblas, aquí y allá, a nuestro paso, una bombilla roja y verde propagaba una orden. Largos trozos de oro señalaban las puertas. Hacía rato que habíamos pasado los números 1800 y después los 3000 y, sin embargo, seguíamos arrebatados por el mismo destino nuestro invencible. Seguía, el pequeño cazador con galones, al innominado en la sombra, como a su propio instinto. Nada en aquel antro parecía cogerlo desprevenido. Su silbido modulaba un tono lastimero, cuando nos cruzábamos con un negro, una camarera, negra también. Y nada más.

Con el esfuerzo por acelerar, yo había perdido a lo largo de aquellos pasillos uniformes el poco aplomo que me quedaba al escapar de la Cuarentena. Me iba deshilachando como había visto hacerlo a mi choza con el viento de África entre los diluvios de agua tibia. Allí era presa, por mi parte, de un torrente de sensaciones desconocidas. Llega un momento, entre dos tipos de humanidad, en que te ves debatiéndote en el vacío.

De repente, el chaval, sin avisar, giró. Acabábamos de llegar. Me di de bruces contra una puerta; era mi habitación, una gran caja con paredes de ébano. Sólo encima de la mesa un poco de luz rodeaba una lámpara tímida y verdosa. El director del hotel Laugh Calvin avisaba al viajero que podía contar con su amistad y que se encargaría, él personalmente, de hacer grata la estancia del viajero en Nueva York. La lectura de aquel anuncio, colocado en lugar bien visible, debió de contribuir aún más, de ser posible, a mi marasmo.

Una vez solo, fue mucho peor. Toda aquella América venía a inquietarme, a hacerme preguntas tremendas y a inspirarme de nuevo malos presentimientos, allí mismo, en aquella habitación.

Sobre la cama, ansioso, intentaba familiarizarme, para empezar, con la penumbra de aquel recinto. Las murallas temblaban con un estruendo periódico por el lado de mi ventana. El paso del metro elevado. Se abalanzaba enfrente, entre dos calles, como un obús, lleno de carnes trémulas y picadas; pasaba a tirones por la lunática ciudad, de barrio en barrio. Se lo veía allá ir a lanzarse con el armazón estremecido justo por encima de un torrente de largueros, cuyo eco retumbaba aún muy atrás, de una muralla a otra, cuando había pasado a cien por hora. La hora de la cena me sorprendió durante aquella postración y la de ir a la cama también.

Había sido el metro, sobre todo, lo que me había dejado atontado. Al otro lado del patio, que parecía un pozo, la pared se iluminó con una habitación, luego dos, y después decenas. En algunas de ellas distinguía lo que pasaba. Eran parejas que se acostaban. Parecían tan decaídos como por nuestros pagos, los americanos, tras las horas verticales. Las mujeres tenían los muslos muy llenos y muy pálidos, al menos las que pude ver bien. La mayoría de los hombres se afeitaban, al tiempo que fumaban un puro, antes de acostarse.

En la cama se quitaban las gafas primero y después la dentadura postiza, que metían en un vaso, y dejaban todo a la vista. No parecían hablarse entre sí, entre sexos, exactamente como en la calle. Parecían animales

grandes y muy dóciles, muy acostumbrados a aburrirse. Sólo vi, en total, a dos parejas que se hicieran, a la luz, las cosas que yo me esperaba y sin la menor violencia, por cierto. Las otras mujeres, por su parte, comían caramelos en la cama en espera de que el marido acabara de asearse. Y después todo el mundo apagó.

Es triste el espectáculo de la gente al acostarse; se ve claro que les importa tres cojones cómo vayan las cosas, se ve claro que no intentan comprender, ésos, el porqué de que estemos aquí. Les trae sin cuidado. Duermen de cualquier manera, son unos calzonazos, unos zopencos, sin susceptibilidad, americanos o no. Siempre tienen la conciencia tranquila.

Yo había visto demasiadas cosas poco claras como para estar contento. Sabía demasiado y no suficiente. Hay que salir, me dije, volver a salir. Tal vez lo encuentres, a Robinson. Era una idea idiota, evidentemente, pero recurría a ella para tener un pretexto a fin de salir otra vez, tanto más cuanto que en vano daba vueltas y más vueltas sobre aquella piltra tan pequeña, no lograba pegar ojo ni un instante. Ni siquiera masturbándote, en casos así, experimentas consuelo ni distracción. Conque te entra una desesperación que para qué.

Lo peor es que te preguntas de dónde vas a sacar bastantes fuerzas la mañana siguiente para seguir haciendo lo que has hecho la víspera y desde hace ya tanto tiempo, de dónde vas a sacar fuerzas para ese trajinar absurdo, para esos mil proyectos que nunca salen bien, esos intentos por salir de la necesidad agobiante, intentos siempre abortados, y todo ello para acabar convenciéndote una vez más de que el destino es invencible, de que hay que volver a caer al pie de la muralla, todas las noches, con la angustia del día siguiente, cada vez más precario, más sórdido.

Es la edad también que se acerca tal vez, traidora, y nos amenaza con lo peor. Ya no nos queda demasiada música dentro para hacer bailar a la vida: ahí está. Toda la juventud ha ido a morir al fin del mundo en el silencio de la verdad. ¿Y adonde ir, fuera, decidme, cuando no llevas contigo la suma suficiente de delirio? La verdad es una agonía ya interminable. La verdad de este mundo es la muerte. Hay que escoger: morir o mentir. Yo nunca me he podido matar.

Conque lo mejor era salir a la calle, pequeño suicidio. Cada cual tiene sus modestos dones, su método para conquistar el sueño y jalar. Tenía que dormir para recuperar fuerzas suficientes a fin de ganarme el cocido el día siguiente. Recuperar la energía suficiente para encontrar un currelo mañana y atravesar en seguida, entretanto, el obscuro túnel del sueño. No hay que creer que sea fácil dormirse, una vez que se ha puesto uno a dudar de todo, por tantos miedos sobre todo como te han hecho sentir.

Me vestí y mal que bien llegué al ascensor, pero un poco atontado. Tuve que volver a pasar en el vestíbulo ante otras hileras, otros enigmas arrebatadores de piernas tan tentadoras, de caras tan delicadas y severas. Diosas, en una palabra, diosas busconas. Habríamos podido intentar llegar a un acuerdo. Pero temía que me detuvieran. Complicaciones. Casi todos los deseos del pobre están castigados con la cárcel. Y volví a engolfarme en la calle. No era la misma multitud de antes. Ésta manifestaba un poco más de audacia, en su aborregamiento por las aceras, como si hubiese llegado, aquella multitud, a un país menos árido, el de la distracción, el país de la noche.

Avanzaba la gente hacia las luces colgadas en la noche y a lo lejos, serpiente agitada y multicolor. De todas las calles de los alrededores afluía. Forma un buen montón de dólares, pensé, una multitud así, ¡sólo en pañuelos, por ejemplo, o en medias de seda! ¡E incluso en pitillos sólo! ¡Y pensar que, aunque te pasees en medio de todo ese dinero, no consigues ni un céntimo más, ni para ir a comer siquiera! Es desesperante, cuando lo piensas, lo defendidos que van los hombres, unos de otros, como casas.

También yo fui callejeando hasta las luces, un cine y después otro y luego otro al lado y así toda la calle arriba. Perdíamos grandes pedazos de multitud delante de cada uno de ellos. Elegí uno en cuyas fotos había mujeres en combinación, ¡y qué muslos, amigos! ¡Firmes! ¡Amplios! ¡Precisos! Y, además, cabecitas muy monas por encima, como dibujadas en contraste, delicadas, frágiles, a lápiz, sin retoques, perfectas, ni un descuido, ni una mancha de tinta, perfectas, repito, monas pero firmes y concisas al mismo tiempo. Todo lo más peligroso que la vida puede desarrollar, auténticas imprudencias de belleza, esas indiscreciones sobre las divinas y profundas armonías posibles.

Se estaba bien, en aquel cine, cómodo y cálido. Órganos voluminosos de lo más tierno, como en una basílica, pero con calefacción, órganos como muslos. Ni un momento perdido. Te sumerges de lleno en el perdón tibio. Habría bastado con dejarse llevar para pensar que el mundo acababa tal vez de convertirse por fin a la indulgencia. Ya casi estabas en ella.

Entonces los sueños suben en la noche para ir a abrasarse en el espejismo de la luz en movimiento. No está del todo vivo lo que sucede en las pantallas, queda dentro un gran espacio confuso, para los pobres, para los sueños y para los muertos. Tienes que atiborrarte rápido de sueños para atravesar la vida que te aguarda fuera, a la salida del cine, resistir unos días más esa atrocidad de cosas y hombres. Eliges, de entre los sueños, los que más te reaniman el alma. Para mí, eran, lo confieso, los de cochinadas. No hay que ser orgulloso, le sacas, a un milagro, lo que puedes retener. Una rubia con unos chuchais y una nuca inolvidables creyó oportuno venir a romper el silencio de la pantalla con una canción sobre su soledad. Habría sido capaz de llorar con ella.

¡Eso es lo bueno! ¡Qué ánimos te da! El valor, lo sentía ya, me iba a durar dos días por lo menos. No esperé siquiera a que volviesen a iluminar la sala. Estaba listo para todas las resoluciones del sueño, ahora que había absorbido un poco de ese admirable delirio del alma.

De regreso al Laugh Calvin, el portero, pese a haberlo saludado yo, no se dignó darme las buenas noches,

como los de nuestros pagos, pero ahora me la sudaba su desprecio. Una vida interior intensa se basta a sí misma y podría fundir veinte años de hielo. Eso es.

En mi habitación, apenas había cerrado los ojos, cuan.-do la rubia del cine vino a cantarme de nuevo y al instante, para mí solo ahora, toda la melodía de su angustia. Yo la ayudaba, por así decir, a dormirme y lo conseguí bastante bien… Ya no estaba del todo solo… Es imposible dormir solo…

Para alimentarte económicamente en América, puedes ir a comprarte un panecillo caliente con una salchicha dentro; es cómodo, se vende en las esquinas y es baratito. Comer en el barrio de los pobres no me importaba en absoluto, la verdad, pero no volver a encontrar nunca a aquellas hermosas criaturas para ricos, eso sí que resultaba muy duro. En ese caso ya no vale la pena jalar siquiera.

En el Laugh Calvin aún podía, por aquellas alfombras espesas, parecer que buscaba a alguien entre las bellísimas mujeres de la entrada, envalentonarme poco a poco en su equívoco ambiente. Al pensar en eso, me confesé que habían tenido razón, los de la *Infanta Combitta,* ahora me daba cuenta, con la experiencia: para ser un pelagatos yo no tenía gustos serios. Habían hecho bien, los compañeros de la galera, al meterse conmigo. Sin embargo, seguí sin recuperar el valor. Volvía a tomar dosis y más dosis de cine, aquí y allá, pero apenas bastaban para recuperar el ánimo necesario con que dar un paseo o dos. Nada más. En África, había conocido, desde luego, un tipo de soledad bastante brutal, pero el aislamiento en aquel hormiguero americano cobraba un cariz más abrumador aún.

Siempre había temido estar casi vacío, no tener, en una palabra, razón seria alguna para existir. Ahora, ante la evidencia de los hechos, estaba bien convencido de mi nulidad personal. En aquel medio demasiado diferente de aquel en que tenía mezquinas costumbres, me había como disuelto al instante. Me sentía muy próximo a dejar de existir, pura y simplemente. Así, ahora lo descubría, en cuanto habían dejado de hablarme de las cosas familiares, ya nada me impedía hundirme en una especie de hastío irresistible, en una forma de catástrofe dulzona y espantosa. Una asquerosidad.

La víspera de dejar mi último dólar en aquella aventura, seguía hastiado y tan profundamente, que me negaba incluso a examinar las necesidades más urgentes. Somos, por naturaleza, tan fútiles, que sólo las distracciones pueden impedirnos de verdad morir. Yo, por mi parte, me aferraba al cine con un fervor desesperado.

Al salir de las tinieblas delirantes de mi hotel, probaba aún a hacer algunas excursiones por las calles principales de los alrededores, carnaval insípido de casas vertiginosas. Mi hastío se agravaba ante aquellas extensiones de fachadas, aquella monotonía llena de adoquines, ladrillos y bovedillas y comercio y más comercio, chancro del mundo, que prorrumpía en anuncios prometedores y pustulentos. Cien mil mentiras meningíticas.

Por el lado del río, recorrí otras callejuelas y más callejuelas, cuyas dimensiones se volvían más corrientes, es decir, que se habría podido, por ejemplo, desde la acera en que me encontraba, romper todos los cristales de un mismo inmueble de enfrente.

Los tufos de una fritura continua llenaban aquellos barrios, las tiendas ya no montaban los escaparates, por los robos. Todo me recordaba los alrededores de mi hospital en Villejuif, hasta los niños de grandes rodillas patizambas por las aceras y también los organillos. Con gusto me habría quedado con ellos, pero tampoco me habrían alimentado, los pobres, y los habría visto a todos todo el tiempo y su tremenda miseria me daba miedo. Conque, al final, volví hacia la ciudad alta. «¡Serás cabrón! – me decía entonces-. ¡La verdad es que no tienes perdón de Dios!» Tenemos que resignarnos a conocernos cada día un poco mejor, ya que nos falta el valor para acabar con nuestros propios lloriqueos de una vez por todas.

Un tranvía pasaba por la orilla del Hudson hacia el centro de la ciudad, un vehículo viejo que temblaba con todas sus ruedas y su armazón inquieto. Tardaba una buena hora en hacer su recorrido. Sus viajeros se sometían con paciencia a un complicado rito de pago mediante una especie de molinillo de café para monedas colocado a la entrada del vagón. El revisor los miraba pagar, vestido como uno de los nuestros, con uniforme de «miliciano balcánico prisionero».

Por fin llegábamos, molidos; volvía a pasar, al regreso de aquellas excursiones populistas, ante la inagotable y doble hilera de las bellezas de mi vestíbulo tantálico y volvía a pasar otra vez y siempre pensativo y deseoso.

Mi indigencia era tal, que ya no me atrevía a hurgarme en los bolsillos para cerciorarme. ¡Con tal de que Lola no hubiera decidido ausentarse en aquel momento!, pensaba… Pero, antes que nada, ¿querría recibirme? ¿Le daría un sablazo de cincuenta o de cien dólares, para empezar?… Vacilaba, sentía que no iba a tener todo el valor, salvo si comía y dormía bien, por una vez. Y después, si me salía bien aquella primera entrevista para el sablazo, me pondría al instante a buscar a Robinson, es decir, en cuanto hubiese recuperado suficientes fuerzas. ¡No era un tipo de mi estilo, él, Robinson! ¡Era un decidido, él, al menos! ¡Un bravo! ¡Ah, qué de trucos y triquiñuelas sobre América debía de conocer! Tal vez dispusiera de un medio para adquirir esa certidumbre, esa tranquilidad que tanta falta me hacían a mí…

Si también él había desembarcado de una galera como me imaginaba y había pisado aquella orilla mucho antes que yo, ¡seguro que ahora ya se habría hecho una situación en América! ¡La impasible agitación de aquellos chiflados no debía de afectarlo, a él! Tal vez yo también, pensándolo mejor, habría podido encontrar un empleo en una de aquellas oficinas, cuyos resplandecientes rótulos leía desde fuera… Pero la idea de tener que penetrar en una de aquellas casas me espantaba y me vencía la timidez. Mi hotel me bastaba. Tumba

gigantesca y odiosamente animada.

¿Sería tal vez que a los habituados no les causaban el mismo efecto que a mí aquellos amontonamientos de materia y alvéolos comerciales? ¿Aquellas organizaciones de largueros hasta el infinito? Para ellos tal vez fuese la seguridad todo aquel diluvio en suspenso, mientras que para mí no era sino un sistema abominable de coacciones, en forma de ladrillos, pasillos, cerrojos, ventanillas, una tortura arquitectónica gigantesca, inexpiable.

Filosofar no es sino otra forma de tener miedo y no conduce sino a simulacros cobardes.

Como ya sólo me quedaban tres dólares en el bolsillo, fui a verlos agitarse en la palma de mi mano, mis dólares, a la luz de los anuncios de Times Square, placita asombrosa donde la publicidad salpica por encima de la multitud ocupada en elegir un cine. Me busqué un restaurante muy económico y acabé en uno de esos refectorios públicos racionalizados donde el servicio se reduce al mínimo y el rito alimentario está simplificado a la medida exacta de la necesidad natural.

En la entrada misma te ponen una bandeja en la mano y vas a ocupar tu sitio en la fila. A esperar. Vecinas muy agradables, candidatas a la cena como yo, no me decían ni pío… Debe de causar una sensación extraña, pensaba, poder permitirse abordar así a una de esas señoritas de nariz precisa y linda. «Señorita -le dirías-, soy rico, muy rico… dígame a qué podría invitarla…»

Entonces todo se vuelve sencillo al instante, divinamente, todo lo que era tan complicado un momento antes… Todo se transforma y el mundo tremendamente hostil rueda al instante a tus pies en forma de bola hipócrita, dócil y aterciopelada. Tal vez entonces pierdas al mismo tiempo la agotadora costumbre de pensar en los triunfadores, en las fortunas felices, ya que puedes tocar con los dedos todo eso. La vida de la gente sin medios no es sino un largo rechazo en un largo delirio y sólo se conoce de verdad, sólo se supera de verdad, lo que se posee. Yo, por mi parte, tenía, a fuerza de coger y dejar sueños, la conciencia a merced de las corrientes de aire, toda hendida por mil grietas y trastornada de modo repugnante.

Entretanto, no me atrevía a iniciar con aquellas jóvenes del restaurante la más anodina conversación. Sostenía, discreto y silencioso, mi bandeja. Cuando me llegó el turno de pasar ante las fuentes de loza llenas de salchichas y alubias, tomé todo lo que daban. Aquel refectorio estaba tan limpio, tan bien iluminado, que te sentías como transportado a la superficie de su mosaico, cual mosca sobre leche.

Las dependientas, estilo enfermeras, se encontraban tras las pastas, el arroz, la compota. Cada una con su especialidad. Me atiborré con lo que distribuían las más amables. Por desgracia, no dirigían sonrisas a los clientes. En cuanto te servían, tenías que ir a sentarte a la chita callando y dejar el sitio a otro. Andabas a pasitos cortos con tu bandeja en equilibrio como por una sala de operaciones. Era un cambio respecto a mi Laugh Calvin y mi cuartito ébano con ribetes de oro.

Pero si nos inundaban así, a los clientes, con tal profusión de luz, si nos arrancaban por un momento de la noche habitual a nuestra condición, era porque formaba parte de un plan. Alguna idea del propietario. Yo desconfiaba. Causa un efecto muy raro, después de tantos días de sombra, verse bañado de una vez en torrentes de iluminación. A mí aquello me producía una especie de pequeño delirio suplementario. No necesitaba mucho, la verdad.

Bajo la mesita que me había correspondido, de lava inmaculada, no conseguía esconder los pies; me desbordaban por todos lados. Me habría gustado que estuvieran en otra parte, mis pies, de momento, porque desde el otro lado del escaparate éramos observados por la gente de la fila que acabábamos de abandonar en la calle. Esperaban a que hubiésemos acabado, nosotros, de jalar, para venir a instalarse, a su vez. Precisamente para ese fin y para mantenerlos con apetito era para lo que nosotros nos encontrábamos tan bien iluminados y Resaltados, a título de publicidad gratuita. Las fresas de mi pastel estaban acaparadas por tantos reflejos centelleantes, que no podía decidirme a comérmelas. No hay modo de escapar al comercio americano.

No obstante, pese al deslumbramiento de aquellas ascuas y a aquella sujeción, advertí las idas y venidas por nuestros alrededores inmediatos de una camarera muy amable y decidí no perderme ni uno de sus lindos gestos.

Cuando me llegó el turno de que me cambiara el cubierto, tomé buena nota de la forma imprevista de sus ojos, cuyo ángulo externo era mucho más agudo, ascendiente, que los de las mujeres de nuestros pagos. Los párpados ondulaban también muy ligeramente hacia la ceja por el lado de las sienes. Crueldad, en una palabra, pero justo la necesaria, una crueldad que se puede besar, amargura insidiosa como la de los vinos del Rhin, agradable a nuestro pesar.

Cuando estuvo cerca de mí, me puse a hacerle señitas de inteligencia, por así decir, a la camarera, como si la reconociese. Ella me examinó sin la menor complacencia, como un animal, si bien con curiosidad. «Ésta es -me dije- la primera americana que, mira por dónde, se ve obligada a mirarme.»

Tras haber acabado la tarta luminosa, no me quedó más remedio que dejar el sitio a otro. Entonces, titubeando un poco, en lugar de seguir el camino bien indicado que conducía, derecho, a la salida, me armé de audacia y, dejando de lado al hombre de la caja que nos esperaba a todos con nuestro parné, me dirigí hacia ella, la rubia, con lo que me destacaba, totalmente insólito, entre los raudales de luz disciplinada.

Las veinticinco dependientas, en su puesto tras las cosas de comer, me hicieron señas, todas al mismo tiempo, de que me equivocaba de camino, me desviaba. Advertí una gran agitación de formas en la vitrina de la gente que esperaba y los que debían ponerse a jalar detrás de mí vacilaron a la hora de sentarse. Acababa de romper el orden de cosas. Todo el mundo a mi alrededor estaba profundamente asombrado: «¡Debe de ser

otro extranjero!», decían.

Pero yo tenía mi idea, buena o mala, y no quería soltar a la bella que me había servido. Me había mirado, la monina, conque peor para ella. ¡Estaba harto de estar solo! ¡Basta de sueños! ¡Simpatía! ¡Contacto! «Señorita, me conoce usted muy poco, pero yo la amo, ¿quiere usted casarse conmigo?…» De este modo, el más honrado, me dirigí a ella.

Su respuesta no me llegó nunca, pues un guarda gigante, vestido por completo de blanco también, apareció en aquel preciso instante y me empujó hacia fuera, exacta, sencillamente, sin injurias ni brutalidad, hacia la noche, como a un perro que acaba de desmandarse.

Todo aquello se desarrollaba con normalidad, yo no tenía nada que decir.

Volví hacia el Laugh Calvin.

En mi habitación los mismos fragores de siempre venían a estrellarse con su eco, a trombas, primero el estruendo del metro, que parecía lanzarse sobre nosotros desde muy lejos, llevándose, cada vez que pasaba, todos sus acueductos para romper la ciudad con ellos, y después, en los intervalos, llamadas incoherentes de los mecanismos de allá abajo, que subían de la calle y, además, ese rumor difuso de la multitud agitada, vacilante, fastidiosa siempre, siempre marchándose y vacilando otra vez y volviendo. La gran mermelada de los hombres en la ciudad.

Desde donde yo estaba, allí arriba, se les podía gritar todo lo que se quisiera. Lo intenté. Me daban asco todos. No tenía descaro para decírselo de día, cuando los tenía delante, pero desde donde estaba no corría ningún riesgo; les grité: «¡Socorro! ¡Socorro!», sólo para ver si reaccionaban. Ni lo más mínimo. Empujaban la vida y la noche y el día delante de ellos, los hombres. La vida esconde todo a los hombres. En su propio ruido no oyen nada. Se la suda. Y cuanto mayor y más alta es la ciudad, más se la suda. Os lo digo yo, que lo he intentado. No vale la pena.

Fue sólo por razones crematísticas, si bien de lo más urgentes e imperiosas, por lo que me puse a buscar a Lola. De no haber sido por esa lastimosa necesidad, ¡menudo si la habría dejado envejecer y desaparecer sin volver a verla nunca, a aquella puta! Al fin y al cabo, conmigo, no me cabía la menor duda, pensándolo bien, se había comportado del modo más descarado y asqueroso.

El egoísmo de las personas que han tenido algo que ver en tu vida, cuando lo piensas, pasados los años, resulta innegable, tal como fue, es decir, de acero, de platino y mucho más duradero aún que el tiempo mismo.

Durante la juventud, a las indiferencias más áridas, a las granujadas más cínicas, llegas a encontrarles excusas de chifladuras pasionales y también qué sé yo qué signos de romanticismo inexperto. Pero, más adelante, cuando la vida te ha demostrado de sobra la cantidad de cautela, crueldad y malicia que exige simplemente para mantenerla bien que mal, a 37º, te das cuenta, te empapas, estás en condiciones de comprender todas las guarradas que contiene un pasado. Basta con que te contemples escrupulosamente a ti mismo y lo que has llegado a ser en punto a inmundicia. No queda misterio ni bobería, te has jalado toda la poesía por haber vivido hasta entonces. Un tango, la vida.

A la granujilla de mi amiga acabé descubriéndola, tras muchas dificultades, en el vigesimotercer piso de una Calle 77. Es increíble lo que pueden asquearte las personas a las que te dispones a pedir un favor. Era una casa señorial y de buen tono, la suya, como me había imaginado.

Por haber tomado previamente grandes dosis de cine, me encontraba casi dispuesto mentalmente, saliendo del marasmo en que me debatía desde mi desembarco en Nueva York, y el primer contacto fue menos desagradable de lo que había previsto. No pareció experimentar viva sorpresa siquiera al volver a verme, Lola, sólo un poco de desagrado al reconocerme.

Intenté, a modo de preámbulo, esbozar una conversación anodina con ayuda de los temas de nuestro pasado común y ello, por supuesto, en los términos más prudentes posibles, y mencioné, entre otros, pero sin insistir, la guerra como episodio. En eso metí la pata bien. Ella no quería volver a oír hablar nunca más de la guerra, en absoluto. La envejecía. Me devolvió, molesta, la pelota confiándome que la edad me había arrugado, inflado y caricaturizado tanto, que no me habría reconocido en la calle. Intercambiábamos cortesías. ¡Si la muy puta se imaginaba que me iba a herir con semejantes pijaditas…! Ni siquiera me digné responder a tan viles impertinencias.

Su mobiliario no era nada del otro jueves, pero era alegre, de todos modos, soportable, al menos así me pareció al salir de mi Laugh Calvin.

El método, los detalles de una fortuna rápida te dan siempre una impresión de magia. Desde la ascensión de Musyne y de la Sra. Herote, yo sabía que la jodienda es la pequeña mina de oro del pobre. Esas bruscas mudanzas femeninas me encantaban y habría dado, por ejemplo, mi último dólar a la portera de Lola sólo por tirarla de la lengua.

Pero no había portera en su casa. No había una sola portera en la ciudad. Una ciudad sin portera es algo sin historia, sin gusto, insípido como una sopa sin pimienta ni sal, una bazofia informe. ¡Ah, qué sabrosos los restos! Desperdicios, rebabas que rezuman de la alcoba, la cocina, las buhardillas, chorrean en cascadas por la portería, el centro de la vida, ¡qué sabroso infierno! Ciertas porteras de nuestros pagos sucumben a su tarea, se las ve lacónicas, tose que tose, deleitadas, pasmadas; es que están abrumadas, las pobres mártires, consumidas por tanta verdad.

Contra la abominación de ser pobre, conviene, confesémoslo, es un deber, intentarlo todo, embriagarse con

cualquier cosa, vino, del baratito, masturbación, cine. No hay que mostrarse difícil. Nuestras porteras suministran hasta en años de mala cosecha, admitámoslo, a quienes saben tomarlo y recalentarlo, más cerca del corazón, odio para todos los gustos y gratis, el suficiente para hacer saltar un mundo. En Nueva York te encuentras atrozmente desprovisto de esa guindilla vital, sórdida pero viva, irrefutable, sin la cual el espíritu se asfixia y se condena a no murmurar sino vagamente y farfullar pálidas calumnias. Nada que corroa, vulnere, saje, moleste, obsesione, sin portera, y añada leña al fuego del odio universal, lo avive con sus mil detalles innegables.

Desconcierto tanto más sensible cuanto que Lola, sorprendida en su medio, me provocaba precisamente una nueva repugnancia, tenía unas ganas irreprimibles de vomitar sobre la vulgaridad de su éxito, de su orgullo, únicamente trivial y repulsivo, pero, ¿con qué? Por efecto de un contagio instantáneo, el recuerdo de Musyne se me volvió en el mismo instante igual de hostil y repugnante. Un odio intenso nació en mí hacia aquellas dos mujeres, aún dura, se incorporó a mi razón de ser. Me faltó toda una documentación para librarme a tiempo y por fin de toda indulgencia presente y futura hacia Lola. No se puede rehacer lo vivido.

El valor no consiste en perdonar, ¡siempre perdonamos más de la cuenta! Y eso no sirve de nada, está demostrado. Detrás de todos los seres humanos, en la última fila, ¡se ha colocado a la criada! Por algo será. No lo olvidemos nunca. Una noche habrá que adormecer para siempre a la gente feliz, mientras duermen, os lo digo yo, y acabar con ella y con su felicidad de una vez por todas. El día siguiente no se hablará más de su felicidad y habremos conseguido la libertad de ser desgraciados cuanto queramos, igual que la criada. Pero sigo con mi relato: iba y venía, pues, por la habitación, Lola, sin demasiada ropa encima y su cuerpo me parecía, de todos modos, muy apetecible aún. Un cuerpo lujoso siempre es una violación posible, una efracción preciosa, directa, íntima en el cogollo de la riqueza, del lujo y sin desquite posible.

Tal vez sólo esperara un gesto mío para despedirme. En fin fue sobre todo la puñetera gusa la que me inspiró prudencia. Primero, jalar. Y, además, no cesaba de contarme las futilidades de su existencia. Habría que cerrar el mundo, está visto, durante dos o tres generaciones al menos, si ya no hubiera mentiras que contar. Ya no tendríamos nada o casi que decirnos. Pasó a preguntarme lo que pensaba yo de su América. Le confié que había llegado a ese punto de debilidad y angustia en que casi cualquiera y cualquier cosa te resulta temible y, en cuanto a su país, sencillamente me espantaba más que todo el conjunto de amenazas directas, ocultas e imprevisibles que en él encontraba, sobre todo por la enorme indiferencia hacia mí, que lo resumía, a mi parecer.

Tenía que ganarme el cocido, le confesé también, por lo que en breve plazo debía superar todas aquellas sensiblerías. En ese sentido me encontraba muy atrasado y le garanticé mi más sincero agradecimiento, si tenía la amabilidad de recomendarme a algún posible empresario entre sus relaciones… Pero lo más rápido posible… Me contentaría perfectamente con un salario muy modesto… Y fui y le solté muchas otras zalamerías y sandeces. Le cayó bastante mal aquella propuesta humilde pero indiscreta. Desde el primer momento se mostró desalentadora. No conocía absolutamente a nadie que pudiera darme un currelo o una ayuda, respondió. Pasamos a hablar, por fuerza, de la vida en general y después de la suya en particular.

Estábamos espiándonos así, moral y físicamente, cuando llamaron al timbre. Y, después, casi sin transición ni pausa, entraron en la habitación cuatro mujeres, maquilladas, maduras, carnosas, músculo y joyas, muy íntimas con Lola. Tras presentármelas sin demasiados detalles, Lola, muy violenta (era visible), intentaba llevárselas a otro cuarto, pero ellas, poco complacientes, se pusieron a acaparar mi atención todas juntas, para contarme todo lo que sabían sobre Europa. Viejo jardín, Europa, atestado de locos anticuados, eróticos y rapaces. Recitaban de memoria el Chabanais y los Inválidos.

Yo, por mi parte, no había visitado ninguno de esos dos lugares. Demasiado caro el primero, demasiado lejano el segundo. A modo de réplica, fui presa de un arranque de patriotismo automático y fatigado, más necio aún que el que te asalta en esas ocasiones. Les repliqué, enérgico, que su ciudad me deprimía. Una especie de feria aburrida, les dije, cuyos encargados se empeñaban, de todos modos, en hacerla parecer divertida…

Al tiempo que peroraba así, artificial y convencional, no podía dejar de percibir con mayor claridad aún otras razones, además del paludismo, para la depresión física y moral que me abrumaba. Se trataba, por lo demás, de un cambio de costumbres, tenía que aprender una vez más a reconocer nuevos rostros en un medio nuevo, otras formas de hablar y mentir. La pereza es casi tan fuerte como la vida. La trivialidad de la nueva farsa que has de interpretar te agobia y, en resumidas cuentas, necesitas aún más cobardía que valor para volver a empezar. Eso es el exilio, el extranjero, esa inexorable observación de la existencia, tal como es de verdad, durante esas largas horas lúcidas, excepcionales, en la trama del tiempo humano, en que las costumbres del país precedente te abandonan, sin que las otras, las nuevas, te hayan embrutecido aún lo suficiente.

Todo en esos momentos viene a sumarse a tu inmundo desamparo para forzarte, impotente, a discernir las cosas, las personas y el porvenir tales como son, es decir, esqueletos, simples nulidades, que, sin embargo, deberás amar, querer, defender, animar, como si existieran.

Otro país, otras gentes a tu alrededor, agitadas de forma un poco extraña, algunas pequeñas vanidades menos disipadas, cierto orgullo ya sin su razón de ser, sin su mentira, sin su eco familiar: con eso basta, la cabeza te da vueltas, la duda te atrae y el infinito, un humilde y ridículo infinito, se abre sólo para ti y caes en él…

El viaje es la búsqueda de esa nulidad, de ese modesto vértigo para gilipollas…

Se reían con ganas, las cuatro visitantes de Lola, al oírme pronunciar así mi rimbombante confesión de Jean-Jacques de pacotilla ante ellas. Me aplicaron un montón de nombres que, con las deformaciones americanas de su habla zalamera e indecente, apenas comprendí. Chorbas patéticas.

Cuando entró el criado negro para servir el té, guardamos silencio.

Sin embargo, una de aquellas visitantes debía de tener más vista que las demás, pues anunció en voz bien alta que yo estaba temblando de fiebre y que debía de padecer también una sed fuera de lo normal. La merienda que sirvieron me gustó mucho, pese a mi tembleque. Aquellos *sandwiches* me salvaron la vida, puedo asegurarlo.

Siguió una conversación sobre los méritos comparativos de las casas de tolerancia parisinas, sin que yo me tomara la molestia de participar en ella. Aquellas bellezas probaron muchos más licores complicados y después, totalmente animadas y confidenciales bajo su influencia, enrojecieron hablando de «matrimonios». Pese a estar muy ocupado con la manducatoria, no pude dejar de notar al tiempo que se trataba de matrimonios muy especiales, debían de ser incluso uniones entre sujetos muy jóvenes, entre niños, por los cuales recibían comisiones.

Lola advirtió que yo seguía la conversación con atención y curiosidad. Me lanzaba miradas bastante severas. Había dejado de beber. Los hombres que conocía allí, Lola, los americanos, no pecaban, como yo, de curiosos, nunca. Me mantuve con cierta dificultad dentro de los límites de su vigilancia. Tenía ganas de hacer mil preguntas a aquellas mujeres.

Por fin, las invitadas acabaron dejándonos, se marcharon con movimientos torpes, exaltadas por el alcohol y sexualmente reavivadas. Se excitaban perorando con un erotismo curioso: elegante y cínico. Yo presentía en aquello un regusto isabelino cuyas vibraciones me habría gustado mucho sentir yo también, muy preciosas, desde luego, y concentradas al máximo en la punta de mi órgano. Pero aquella comunión biológica, decisiva durante un viaje, aquel mensaje vital, tan sólo pude presentirlos, con gran disgusto, por cierto, y tristeza acrecentada. Incurable melancolía.

En cuanto hubieron cruzado la puerta, las amigas, Lola se mostró francamente excitada. Aquel intermedio le había desagradado profundamente. Yo no dije ni pío.

«¡Qué brujas!», renegó unos minutos después.

«¿De qué las conoces?», le pregunté.

«Son amigas de toda la vida…»

No estaba dispuesta a hacer más confidencias por el momento.

Por sus modales, bastante arrogantes, para con ella, me había parecido que aquellas mujeres tenían, en cierto medio, ascendiente sobre Lola e incluso una autoridad bastante grande, innegable, indiscutible. Nunca iba a saber yo nada más.

Lola dijo que debía salir, pero me invitó a quedarme esperándola allí, en su casa, y comiendo un poco, si aún tenía hambre. Como había abandonado el Laugh Calvin sin pagar la cuenta y sin intención tampoco de volver, ni mucho menos, me alegró mucho la autorización que me concedía, unos momentos más de calorcito antes de ir a afrontar la calle, ¡y qué calle, señores!…

En cuanto me quedé solo, me dirigí por un pasillo hacia el lugar de donde había visto salir al negro a su servicio. A medio camino del *office,* nos encontramos y le estreché la mano. Me condujo, confiado, a su cocina, lindo lugar bien ordenado, mucho más lógico y vistoso que el salón.

Al instante, se puso a escupir ante mí sobre el magnífico embaldosado y como sólo los negros saben hacerlo, lejos, copiosa, perfectamente. También yo escupí por cortesía, pero como pude. En seguida entramos en confidencias. Lola, según me informó, poseía un barco-salón en el río, dos autos en la carretera y una bodega con licores de todos los países del mundo. Recibía catálogos de los grandes almacenes de París. Así mismo. Se puso a repetirme sin fin aquellas mismas informaciones escuetas. Dejé de escucharlo.

Mientras dormitaba junto a él, me vino a la memoria el pasado, los tiempos en que Lola me había dejado en el París de la guerra. Aquella caza, persecución, emboscada, verbosa, falsa, cauta, Musyne, los argentinos, sus barcos llenos de carne, Topo, las cohortes de destripados de la Place Clichy, Robinson, las olas, el mar, la miseria, la cocina tan blanca de Lola, su negro y nada más y yo en medio como cualquier otro. Todo podía continuar. La guerra había quemado a unos, calentado a otros, igual que el fuego tortura o conforta, según estés dentro o delante de él. Hay que espabilarse y se acabó.

También era cierto lo que decía, que yo había cambiado mucho. La existencia es que te retuerce y tritura el rostro. A ella también le había triturado el rostro, pero menos, mucho menos. Los pobres van dados. La miseria es gigantesca, utiliza tu cara, como una bayeta, para limpiar las basuras del mundo. Algo queda.

Sin embargo, yo creía haber notado en Lola algo nuevo, instantes de depresión, de melancolía, lagunas en su optimista necedad, instantes de esos en que la persona ha de hacer acopio de energía para llevar un poco más adelante lo conseguido en su vida, en sus años, ya demasiado pesados, a pesar suyo, para el ánimo que aún tiene, su cochina poesía.

De repente, su negro se puso de nuevo a agitarse. Volvía a darle la manía. Como nuevo amigo, quería atiborrarme de pasteles, cargarme de puros. Al final, sacó, con infinitas precauciones, de un cajón una masa redonda y emplomada.

«¡La bomba! – me anunció, furioso. Retrocedí-. *Liberta! Liberta!»,* vociferaba, jovial.

Volvió a guardar todo en su sitio y escupió espléndidamente otra vez. ¡Qué emoción! Estaba radiante. Su risa me asombró también, un cólico de sensaciones. Un gesto más o menos, me decía yo, apenas tiene importancia. Cuando Lola volvió, por fin, de sus recados, nos encontró juntos en el salón, en pleno fumeque y cachondeo. Hizo como que no notaba nada.

El negro se largó a escape; a mí ella me llevó a su habitación. La encontré triste, pálida y temblorosa. ¿De dónde volvería? Empezaba a hacerse muy tarde. Era la hora en que los americanos se sienten desamparados porque la vida sólo vibra ya a cámara lenta a su alrededor. En el garaje, un auto de cada dos. Es el momento de las confidencias a medias. Pero hay que apresurarse a aprovecharlo. Me preparaba interrogándome, pero el tono que eligió para hacerme ciertas preguntas sobre la vida que llevaba yo en Europa me irritó profundamente.

No ocultó que me consideraba capaz de todas las bajezas. Esa hipótesis no me ofendía, sólo me molestaba. Presentía perfectamente que yo había ido a verla para pedirle dinero y ya eso solo creaba entre nosotros una animosidad muy natural. Todos esos sentimientos rayan en el crimen. Seguíamos en el nivel de las trivialidades y yo hacía lo imposible para que no se produjera una bronca definitiva entre nosotros. Se interesó, entre otras cosas, por los detalles de mis travesuras genitales, me preguntó si no habría abandonado en algún sitio, durante mis vagabundeos, a un niño que ella pudiera adoptar. Extraña idea que se le había ocurrido. Era su manía, la adopción de un niño. Pensaba, con bastante simpleza, que un fracasado de mi estilo debía de haber plantado raíces clandestinas casi por todas las latitudes. Ella era rica, me confió, y se moría por poder dedicarse a un niño, pero no lo conseguía. Había leído todas las obras de puericultura y sobre todo las que se ponen líricas hasta el pasmo al hablar de las maternidades, libros que, si los asimilas del todo, te quitan las ganas de copular, para siempre. Toda virtud tiene su literatura inmunda.

Como ella deseaba sacrificarse exclusivamente por un «chiquitín», a mí no me acompañaba la suerte. Sólo podía ofrecerle el grandullón que yo era, absolutamente repulsivo para ella. Sólo valen, en una palabra, las miserias bien presentadas para tener éxito, las que van bien preparadas por la imaginación. Nuestra charla languideció: «Mira, Ferdinand -me propuso, al final-, ya hemos hablado bastante, te voy a llevar al otro extremo de Nueva York, para visitar a mi protegido, un pequeño del que me ocupo con mucho gusto, aunque su madre me fastidia…» ¡Vaya unas horas! Por el camino, en el coche, hablamos de su catastrófico negro.

«¿Te ha enseñado sus bombas?», me preguntó. Le confesé que me había sometido a esa dura prueba.

«Mira, Ferdinand, no es peligroso, ese maníaco. Carga sus bombas con mis facturas viejas… En tiempos formaba parte, en Chicago, de una sociedad secreta, muy temible, para la emancipación de los negros… Eran, por lo que me han contado, gente horrible… La banda fue disuelta por las autoridades, pero ha conservado ese gusto por las bombas, mi negro… Nunca las carga con pólvora… Le basta el espíritu… En el fondo, no es sino un artista… Nunca acabará de hacer la revolución… Pero lo conservo, ¡es un doméstico excelente! Y, al fin y al cabo, tal vez sea más honrado que los otros, que no hacen la revolución…»

Y volvió a su manía de la adopción.

«Es una lástima, la verdad, que no tengas una hija en alguna parte, Ferdinand, un estilo soñador como el tuyo iría muy bien a una mujer, mientras que a un hombre no le queda nada bien…»

La lluvia, al azotarlo, volvía a cerrar la noche sobre nuestro auto, que se deslizaba sobre la larga cinta de cemento liso. Todo me resultaba hostil y frío, hasta su mano, pese a mantenerla bien cogida en la mía. Todo nos separaba. Llegamos ante una casa muy diferente por el aspecto de la que acabábamos de abandonar. En un piso de una primera planta, un niño de diez años más o menos nos esperaba junto a su madre. El mobiliario de aquellos cuartos imitaba el estilo Luis XV, olían a guiso reciente. El niño fue a sentarse en las rodillas de Lola y la besó con mucha ternura. La madre me pareció también de lo más cariñosa con Lola y, mientras ésta charlaba con el pequeño, yo me las arreglé para llevarme a la madre a la habitación contigua.

Cuando volvimos, el niño estaba ensayando un paso de baile que acababa de aprender en las clases del Conservatorio. «Tiene que recibir algunas lecciones particulares más -concluyó Lola-, ¡y quizá pueda presentarlo al Théâtre du Globe, amiga Vera! ¡Tal vez tenga un brillante porvenir, este niño!» La madre, tras esas palabras alentadoras, se deshizo en lágrimas de agradecimiento. Al mismo tiempo recibió un pequeño fajo de billetes verdes, que guardó en el pecho, como si fueran una carta de amor.

«El pequeño me gusta bastante -observó Lola, cuando estuvimos de nuevo fuera-, pero tengo que soportar también a la madre y no me gustan las madres demasiado astutas… Y, además, es que ese pequeño es demasiado vicioso… No es ésa la clase de cariño que deseo… Quisiera experimentar un sentimiento absolutamente maternal… ¿Me comprendes, Ferdinand?…» Con tal de poder jalar, comprendo todo lo que quieran; lo mío ya no es inteligencia, es caucho.

No se apeaba de su deseo de pureza. Cuando hubimos llegado, unas calles más adelante, me preguntó dónde iba yo a dormir aquella noche y me acompañó unos pasos más por la acera. Le respondí que, si no encontraba unos dólares en aquel mismo momento, no podría acostarme en ninguna parte.

«De acuerdo -respondió ella-. Acompáñame hasta mi casa y te daré un poco de dinero y después te vas a donde quieras.»

Quería dejarme tirado en plena noche y lo antes posible. Cosa normal. De tanto verte expulsado así, a la noche, has de acabar por fuerza en alguna parte, me decía yo. Era el consuelo. «Ánimo, Ferdinand -me repetía a mí mismo, para alentarme-, a fuerza de verte echado a la calle en todas partes, seguro que acabarás descubriendo lo que da tanto miedo a todos, a todos esos cabrones, y que debe de encontrarse al fin de la

noche. ¡Por eso no van ellos hasta el fin de la noche!»

Después todo fue frialdad entre nosotros, en su auto. Las calles que cruzábamos nos amenazaban con todo su silencio armado hasta arriba de piedra, hasta el infinito, con una especie de diluvio en suspenso. Una ciudad al acecho, monstruo lleno de sorpresas, viscoso de asfalto y lluvias. Por fin, aminoramos la marcha. Lola me precedió hacia su portal.

«¡Sube! – me invitó-. ¡Sígueme!»

Otra vez su salón. Yo me preguntaba cuánto iría a darme para acabar de una vez y librarse de mí. Estaba buscando billetes en un bolsillo colocado sobre un mueble. Oí el intenso crujido de los billetes arrugados. ¡Qué segundos! Ya sólo se oía en la ciudad aquel ruido. Sin embargo, me sentía tan violento aún, que le pregunté, no sé por qué, tan inoportuno, cómo estaba su madre, de quien me había olvidado.

«Está enferma, mi madre», dijo, al tiempo que se volvía para mirarme a la cara.

«Entonces, ¿dónde está ahora?»

«En Chicago.»

«¿Qué enfermedad tiene?»

«Cáncer de hígado… La he llevado a los mejores especialistas de la ciudad… Su tratamiento me cuesta muy caro, pero la salvarán. Me lo han prometido.»

Precipitadamente, me dio muchos otros detalles relativos al estado de su madre en Chicago. De golpe se puso de lo más tierna y familiar y ya no pudo por menos de pedirme un consuelo íntimo. Estaba en mis manos.

«Y tú, Ferdinand, piensas también que la curarán, ¿verdad?»

«No -respondí muy franco, muy categórico-, los cánceres de hígado son absolutamente incurables.»

De pronto, palideció hasta el blanco de los ojos. Era la primera, pero es que la primera, vez que la veía yo desconcertada, a aquella puta, por algo.

«Pero, Ferdinand, ¡si los especialistas me han asegurado que curaría! Me lo han garantizado… ¡Por escrito!… Son, verdad, unas eminencias…»

«Por la pasta, Lola, habrá siempre, por fortuna, eminencias médicas… Yo haría lo mismo, si estuviera en su lugar… Y tú también, Lola, harías lo mismo…»

Lo que le decía le pareció, de pronto, tan innegable, tan evidente, que no intentó discutir más.

Por una vez, por primera vez quizás en su vida, Le iba a faltar desparpajo.

«Oye, Ferdinand, me estás causando una pena infinita, ¿te das cuenta?… Quiero con locura a mi madre, lo sabes, ¿no?, que la quiero con locura…»

¡Muy a propósito! ¡Huy, la Virgen! Pero, ¿qué cojones puede importarle al mundo? ¿Que quiera uno o no a su madre?

Sollozaba, sumida en su vacío, Lola.

«Ferdinand, tú eres un fracasado despreciable -prosiguió furiosa- ¡y un malvado horrible!… Te estás vengando así, del modo más cobarde posible, por tu desesperada situación, viniendo a decirme cosas espantosas… ¡Estoy segura incluso de que estás haciendo mucho daño a mi madre al hablar así!…»

En su desesperación había resabios del método Coué.

Su excitación no me daba, ni mucho menos, el miedo que la de los oficiales del *Amiral-Bragueton,* los que pretendían liquidarme para distraer a las damas ociosas.

Miraba yo atento a Lola, mientras me ponía verde, y sentía algo de orgullo, al comprobar, en cambio, que mi indiferencia o, mejor dicho, mi alegría, iba en aumento, a medida que me insultaba más. Por dentro somos amables.

«Para deshacerse de mí -calculé- va a tener que darme ahora por lo menos veinte dólares… Tal vez más incluso…»

Tomé la ofensiva: «Lola, préstame, por favor, el dinero que me has prometido o, si no, me quedo a dormir aquí y me vas a oír repetir todo lo que sé sobre el cáncer, sus complicaciones, sus trasmisiones por herencia, pues el cáncer es, por si no lo sabías, hereditario, Lola. ¡No hay que olvidarlo!»

A medida que yo recalcaba, perfilaba los detalles sobre el caso de su madre, la veía palidecer ante mí, a Lola, flaquear, debilitarse. «¡Toma, puta! – me decía yo-. ¡Duro ahí, Ferdinand! ¡Para una vez que tienes la sartén por el mango!… No la sueltes… ¡Tardarás mucho en encontrar uno tan sólido!…»

«¡Toma! – dijo, completamente crispada-. ¡Aquí tienes tus cien dólares! ¡Lárgate y no vuelvas nunca! ¿Me oyes? ¡Nunca!… *Out! Out! Out!* ¡Cerdo asqueroso!…»

«Pero, dame un besito, Lola, a pesar de todo. ¡Anda!… ¡No estamos enfadados!», propuse para ver hasta qué extremo podría asquearla. Entonces sacó un revólver del cajón y no precisamente en broma. La escalera me bastó, ni siquiera llamé al ascensor.

De todos modos, aquel broncazo me devolvió las ganas de trabajar y el valor. El día siguiente mismo cogí el tren para Detroit, donde, según me aseguraron, era fácil encontrar muchos currelillos no demasiado duros y bien pagados.

La gente me decía por la calle lo mismo que el sargento en el bosque. «¡Mire! – me decían-. No tiene pérdida, es justo enfrente.»

Y vi, en efecto, los grandes edificios rechonchos y acristalados, a modo de jaulas sin fin para moscas, en las que se veían hombres moviéndose, pero muy lentos, como si ya sólo forcejearan muy débilmente con yo qué

sé qué imposible. ¿Eso era Ford? Y, además, por todos lados y por encima, hasta el cielo, un estruendo múltiple y sordo de torrentes de aparatos, duro, la obstinación de las máquinas girando, rodando, gimiendo, siempre a punto de romperse y sin romperse nunca.

«Conque es aquí… -me dije-. No es apasionante…» Era incluso peor que todo lo demás. Me acerqué más, hasta la puerta, donde en una pizarra decía que necesitaban gente.

No era yo el único que esperaba. Uno de los que aguardaban me dijo que llevaba dos días allí y aún en el mismo sitio. Había venido desde Yugoslavia, aquel borrego, a pedir trabajo. Otro pelagatos me dirigió la palabra, venía a currelar, según decía, sólo por gusto, un maníaco, un fantasma.

En aquella multitud casi nadie hablaba inglés. Se espiaban entre sí como animales desconfiados, apaleados con frecuencia. De su masa subía el olor de entrepiernas orinadas, como en el hospital. Cuando te hablaban, esquivabas la boca, porque el interior de los pobres huele ya a muerte.

Llovía sobre nuestro gentío. Las filas se comprimían bajo los canalones. Se comprime con facilidad la gente que busca currelo. Lo que les gustaba de Ford, fue y me explicó el viejo ruso, dado a las confidencias, era que contrataban a cualquiera y cualquier cosa. «Sólo, que ándate con ojo -añadió, para que supiera a qué atenerme-, no hay que ponerse chulito en esta casa, porque, si te pones chulito, en un dos por tres te pondrán en la calle y te sustituirá, en un dos por tres también, una máquina de las que tienen siempre listas y, si quieres volver, ¡te dirán que nanay!» Hablaba castizo, aquel ruso, porque había estado años en el «taxi» y lo habían echado a consecuencia de un asunto de tráfico de cocaína en Bezons y, para colmo, se había jugado el coche a los dados con un cliente en Biarritz y lo había perdido.

Era cierto lo que me explicaba de que cogían a cualquiera en la casa Ford. No había mentido. Aun así, yo no acababa de creérmelo, porque los pelagatos deliran con facilidad. Llega un momento, en la miseria, en que el alma abandona el cuerpo en ocasiones. Se encuentra muy mal en él, la verdad. Ya casi es un alma la que te habla. Y no es responsable, un alma.

En pelotas nos pusieron, claro está, para empezar. El reconocimiento se hacía como en un laboratorio. Desfilábamos despacio. «Estás hecho una braga -comentó antes que nada el enfermero al mirarme-, pero no importa.»

¡Y yo que había temido que no me dieran el currelo en cuanto notaran que había tenido las fiebres de África, si por casualidad me palpaban el hígado! Pero, al contrario, parecían muy contentos de encontrar a feos y lisiados en nuestra tanda.

«Para lo que vas a hacer aquí, ¡no tiene importancia la constitución!», me tranquilizó el médico examinador, en seguida.

«Me alegro -respondí yo-, pero, mire, señor, tengo instrucción yo e incluso empecé en tiempos los estudios de medicina…»

De repente, me miró con muy mala leche. Tuve la sensación de haber vuelto a meter la pata y en mi contra.

«¡No te van a servir de nada aquí los estudios, chico! No has venido aquí para pensar, sino para hacer los gestos que te ordenen ejecutar… En nuestra fábrica no necesitamos a imaginativos. Lo que necesitamos son chimpancés… Y otro consejo. ¡No vuelvas a hablarnos de tu inteligencia! ¡Ya pensaremos por ti, amigo! Ya lo sabes.»

Tenía razón en avisarme. Más valía que supiera a qué atenerme sobre las costumbres de la casa. Tonterías ya había hecho bastantes para diez años por lo menos. En adelante me interesaba pasar por un calzonazos. Una vez vestidos, nos repartieron en filas cansinas, en grupos vacilantes de refuerzo hacia los lugares de donde nos llegaban los estrépitos de las máquinas. Todo temblaba en el inmenso edificio y nosotros mismos de los pies a las orejas, atrapados por el temblor, que llegaba de los cristales, el suelo y la chatarra, en sacudidas, vibraciones de arriba abajo. Te volvías máquina tú mismo a la fuerza, con toda la carne aún temblequeante, entre aquel ruido furioso, tremendo, que se te metía dentro y te envolvía la cabeza y más abajo, te agitaba las tripas y volvía a subir hasta los ojos con un ritmo precipitado, infinito, incansable. A medida que avanzábamos, perdíamos a los compañeros. Les sonreíamos un poquito a ésos, al separarnos, como si todo lo que sucedía fuera muy agradable. Ya no podíamos hablarnos ni oírnos. Todas las veces se quedaban tres o cuatro en torno a una máquina.

De todos modos, resistías, te costaba asquearte de tu propia substancia, habrías querido detener todo aquello para reflexionar y oír latir en ti el corazón con facilidad, pero ya no podías. Aquello ya no podía acabar. Era como un cataclismo, aquella caja infinita de aceros, y nosotros girábamos dentro con las máquinas y con la tierra. ¡Todos juntos! Y los mil rodillos y pilones que nunca caían a un tiempo, con ruidos que se atropellaban unos contra otros y algunos tan violentos, que desencadenaban a su alrededor como silencios que te aliviaban un poco.

La vagoneta llena de chatarra apenas podía pasar entre las máquinas. ¡Que se apartaran todos! Que saltasen para que pudiera arrancar de nuevo, aquella histérica. Y, ¡hale!, iba a agitarse más adelante, la muy loca, traqueteando entre poleas y volantes, a llevar a los hombres sus raciones de grilletes.

Los obreros inclinados, atentos a dar todo el placer posible a las máquinas, daban asco, venga pasarles pernos y más pernos, en lugar de acabar de una vez por todas, con aquel olor a aceite, aquel vaho que te quemaba los tímpanos y el interior de los oídos por la garganta. No era por vergüenza por lo que bajaban la cabeza. Cedías ante el ruido como ante la guerra. Te abandonabas ante las máquinas con las tres ideas que te

quedaban vacilando en lo alto, detrás de la frente. Se acabó. Miraras donde mirases, ahora todo lo que la mano tocaba era duro. Y todo lo que aún conseguías recordar un poco estaba rígido también como el hierro y ya no tenía sabor en el pensamiento.

Habías envejecido más que la hostia de una vez.

Había que abolir la vida de fuera, convertirla también en acero, en algo útil. No nos gustaba bastante tal como era, por eso. Había que convertirla, pues, en un objeto, en algo sólido, ésa era la regla.

Intenté hablarle, al encargado, al oído, me respondió con un gruñido de cerdo y sólo con gestos me enseñó, muy paciente, la sencillísima maniobra que yo debía realizar en adelante y para siempre. Mis minutos, mis horas, el resto de mi tiempo, como los demás, se consumirían en pasar clavijas pequeñas al ciego de al lado, que las calibraba, ése, desde hacía años, las clavijas, las mismas. Yo en seguida empecé a cometer graves errores. No me regañaron, pero, tras tres días de aquel trabajo inicial, me destinaron, como un fracasado ya, a conducir la carretilla llena de arandelas, la que iba traqueteando de una máquina a otra. Aquí dejaba tres; allí, doce; allá, cinco sólo. Nadie me hablaba. Ya sólo existíamos gracias a una como vacilación entre el embotamiento y el delirio. Ya sólo importaba la continuidad estrepitosa de los miles y miles de instrumentos que mandaban a los hombres.

Cuando a las seis todo se detenía, te llevabas contigo el ruido en la cabeza; yo lo conservaba la noche entera, el ruido y el olor a aceite también, como si me hubiesen puesto una nariz nueva, un cerebro nuevo para siempre.

Conque, a fuerza de renunciar, poco a poco, me convertí en otro… Un nuevo Ferdinand. Al cabo de unas semanas. Aun así, volvía a sentir deseos de ver de nuevo a personas de fuera. No las del taller, por supuesto, que no eran sino ecos y olores de máquinas como yo, carnes en vibración hasta el infinito, mis compañeros. Un cuerpo auténtico era lo que quería yo tocar, un cuerpo rosa de auténtica vida silenciosa y suave.

Yo no conocía a nadie en aquella ciudad y sobre todo a ninguna mujer. Con mucha dificultad conseguí averiguar la dirección de una «Casa», un burdel clandestino, en el barrio septentrional de la ciudad. Fui a pasearme por allí algunas tardes seguidas, después de la fábrica, en reconocimiento. Aquella calle se parecía a cualquier otra, aunque más limpia tal vez que la mía.

Había localizado el hotelito, rodeado de jardines, donde pasaba lo que pasaba. Había que entrar rápido para que el guripa que hacía guardia cerca de la puerta pudiera hacer como que no había visto nada. Fue el primer lugar de América en que me recibieron sin brutalidad, con amabilidad incluso, por mis cinco dólares. Y había las chavalas bellas, llenitas, tersas de salud y fuerza graciosa, casi tan bellas, al fin y al cabo, como las del Laugh Calvin.

Y, además, a aquellas podías tocarlas sin rodeos. No pude por menos de volverme un parroquiano de aquel lugar. En él acababa toda mi paga. Necesitaba, al llegar la noche, las promiscuidades eróticas de aquellas criaturas tan espléndidas y acogedoras para recuperar el alma. El cine ya no me bastaba, antídoto benigno, sin efecto real contra la atrocidad material de la fábrica. Había que recurrir, para seguir adelante, a los tónicos potentes, desmadrados, a métodos más drásticos. A mí sólo me exigían cánones módicos en aquella casa, arreglos de amigos, porque les había traído de Francia, a aquellas damas, algunas cosillas. Sólo que el sábado por la noche, no había nada que hacer, había un llenazo y yo dejaba todo el sitio a los equipos de *baseball* que habían salido de juerga, con vigor magnífico, tíos cachas a quienes la felicidad parecía resultar tan fácil como respirar.

Mientras disfrutaban los equipos, yo, por mi parte, escribía relatos cortos en la cocina y para mí sólo. El entusiasmo de aquellos deportistas por las criaturas del lugar no alcanzaba, desde luego, al fervor, un poco impotente, del mío. Aquellos atletas tranquilos en su fuerza estaban hartos de perfección física. La belleza es como el alcohol o el confort, te acostumbras a ella y dejas de prestarle atención.

Iban sobre todo, ellos, al picadero, por el cachondeo. Muchas veces acababan dándose unas hostias que para qué. Entonces llegaba la policía en tromba y se llevaba a todo el mundo en camionetas.

Hacia una de las jóvenes del lugar, Molly, no tardé en experimentar un sentimiento excepcional de confianza, que, en los seres atemorizados, hace las veces de amor.

Recuerdo, como si fuera ayer, sus atenciones, sus piernas largas y rubias, magníficamente finas y musculosas, piernas nobles. La auténtica aristocracia humana la confieren, digan lo que digan, las piernas, eso por descontado.

Llegamos a ser íntimos en cuerpo y espíritu y todas las semanas íbamos juntos a pasearnos unas horas por la ciudad. Tenía posibles, aquella amiga, ya que se hacía unos cien dólares al día en la casa, mientras que yo, en Ford, apenas ganaba diez. El amor que hacía para vivir apenas la fatigaba. Los americanos lo hacen como los pájaros.

Por la noche, tras haber conducido mi carrito ambulante, me imponía a mí mismo la obligación de aparecer, después de cenar, con cara amable para ella. Hay que ser alegre con las mujeres, al menos en los comienzos. Sentía un deseo vago y lancinante de proponerle cosas, pero ya no me quedaban fuerzas. Comprendía perfectamente el desánimo industrial, Molly, estaba acostumbrada a tratar con obreros.

Una tarde, sin más ni más, me ofreció cincuenta dólares. Primero la miré. No me atrevía. Pensaba en lo que habría dicho mi madre en un caso así. Y después pensé que mi madre, la pobre, nunca me había ofrecido tanto. Para agradar a Molly, fui, al instante, a comprar con sus dólares un bonito traje de color beige pastel *(four piece suit),* como estaban de moda en la primavera de aquel año. Nunca me habían visto llegar tan

peripuesto al picadero. La patrona puso en marcha su enorme gramófono, con el exclusivo fin de enseñarme a bailar.

Después, fuimos al cine, Molly y yo, para estrenar mi traje nuevo. Por el camino me preguntaba si estaba celoso, porque el traje me daba aspecto triste y ganas también de no volver nunca más a la fábrica. Un traje nuevo es algo que te trastorna las ideas. Ella daba besitos apasionados a mi traje, cuando la gente no nos miraba. Yo intentaba pensar en otra cosa.

De todos modos, ¡qué mujer, aquella Molly! ¡Qué generosa! ¡Qué carnes! ¡Qué plenitud juvenil! Un festín de deseos. Y me volvía la aprensión. ¿Chulo de putas?… pensaba.

«¡No vayas más a la Ford -me desanimaba, además, Molly-. Búscate mejor un empleillo en una oficina… De traductor, por ejemplo, es tu estilo… A ti los libros te gustan…»

Así me aconsejaba, con mucho cariño, quería que yo fuese feliz. Por primera vez un ser humano se interesaba por mí, desde dentro, podríamos decir, por mi egoísmo, se ponía en mi lugar y no se limitaba a juzgarme desde el suyo, como todos los demás.

¡Ah, si la hubiera conocido antes, a Molly, cuando aún estaba a tiempo de seguir un camino y no otro! ¡Antes de perder mi entusiasmo con la puta de Musyne y el bicho de Lola! Pero era demasiado tarde para rehacer la juventud. ¡Ya no creía en ella! En seguida te vuelves viejo y de forma irremediable. Lo notas porque has aprendido a amar tu desgracia, a tu pesar. Es la naturaleza, que es más fuerte que tú, y se acabó. Nos ensaya en un género y ya no podemos salir de él. Yo había seguido la dirección de la inquietud. Te tomas en serio tu papel y tu destino poco a poco y luego, cuando te quieres dar cuenta, es demasiado tarde para cambiarlos. Te has vuelto inquieto y así te quedas para siempre.

Intentaba con mucha amabilidad retenerme junto a ella, Molly, disuadirme… «Mira, Ferdinand, ¡la vida aquí es igual que en Europa! No vamos a ser infelices juntos. – Y tenía razón en un sentido-. Invertiremos los ahorros… compraremos un comercio… Seremos como todo el mundo…» Lo decía para calmar mis escrúpulos. Proyectos. Yo le daba la razón. Me daba vergüenza incluso que hiciera tantos esfuerzos por conservarme. Yo la amaba, desde luego, pero más aún amaba mi vicio, aquel deseo de huir de todas partes, en busca de no sé qué, por orgullo tonto seguramente, por convicción de una especie de superioridad.

Yo no quería herirla, ella comprendía y se adelantaba a tranquilizarme. Era tan cariñosa, que acabé confesándole la manía que me aquejaba de largarme de todos lados. Me escuchó durante días y días explayarme y explicarme hasta el hastío, debatiéndome entre fantasmas y orgullos, y no se impacientaba: al contrario. Sólo intentaba ayudarme a vencer aquella angustia vana y boba. No comprendía muy bien adonde quería yo ir a parar con mis divagaciones, pero me daba la razón, de todos modos, contra los fantasmas o con los fantasmas, a mi gusto. A fuerza de dulzura persuasiva, su bondad llegó a serme familiar y casi personal. Pero me parecía que yo empezaba entonces a hacer trampa con mi dichoso destino, con mi razón de ser, como yo la llamaba, y de repente cesé de contarle todo lo que pensaba. Volví solo a mi interior, muy contento de ser aún más desgraciado que antes porque había llevado hasta mi soledad una nueva forma de angustia y algo que se parecía al sentimiento auténtico.

Todo esto es trivial. Pero Molly estaba dotada de una paciencia angélica, precisamente creía a pie juntillas en las vocaciones. A su hermana menor, por ejemplo, en la Universidad de Arizona, le había dado la manía de fotografiar los pájaros en sus nidos y las rapaces en sus guaridas. Conque, para que pudiera continuar asistiendo a los extraños cursos de aquella técnica especial, Molly le enviaba regularmente, a su hermana fotógrafa, cincuenta dólares al mes.

Un corazón infinito, la verdad, con sublimidad auténtica dentro, que puede transformarse en parné, no en fantasmadas como el mío y tantos otros. En cuanto a mí, Molly estaba más que deseosa de interesarse pecuniariamente en mi mediocre aventura. Aunque por momentos le pareciera un muchacho bastante atolondrado, mi convicción le parecía real y digna de estímulo. Sólo me invitaba a establecer como un pequeño balance para una pensión presupuestaria que quería concederme. Yo no podía decidirme a aceptar aquella dádiva. Un último resabio de delicadeza me impedía aprovechar más, especular con aquella naturaleza demasiado espiritual y cariñosa, la verdad. Por eso, entré deliberadamente en conflicto con la Providencia.

Di incluso, avergonzado, algunos pasos para volver a la Ford. Pequeños heroísmos sin resultado, por cierto. Llegué justo hasta la puerta de la fábrica, pero me quedé paralizado en aquel lugar liminar, y la perspectiva de todas aquellas máquinas que me esperaban girando eliminó en mí sin remedio aquellas veleidades laborales.

Me coloqué ante la gran cristalera del generador eléctrico, gigante multiforme que bramaba al absorber y repeler no sabía yo de dónde, no sabía yo qué, por mil tubos relucientes, intrincados y viciosos como lianas. Una mañana que estaba así, contemplando boquiabierto, pasó por casualidad el ruso del taxi. «Chico -me dijo-, ¡ya te puedes despedir!… Hace tres semanas que no vienes… Ya te han substituido por una máquina… Y eso que te había avisado…»

«Así -me dije entonces-, al menos se acabó… Ya no tengo que volver…» Y salí de vuelta para la ciudad. Al llegar, volví a pasar por el consulado, para preguntar si habían oído hablar por casualidad de un francés llamado Robinson.

«¡Pues claro! ¡Claro que sí! – me respondieron los cónsules-. Incluso vino a vernos dos veces y aún tenía documentación falsa. Por cierto, ¡que la policía lo busca! ¿Lo conoce usted?…» No insistí.

Desde entonces me esperaba encontrarlo a cada momento, al Robinson. Sentía que estaba al caer. Molly

seguía tan tierna y cariñosa. Más cariñosa incluso que antes estaba, desde que se había convencido de que yo quería irme definitivamente. De nada servía que fuera cariñosa conmigo.

Molly y yo recorríamos con frecuencia los alrededores de la ciudad, las tardes que ella libraba. Colinitas peladas, bosquecillos de abedules en torno a lagos minúsculos, gente, aquí y allá, leyendo revistas insulsas bajo el pesado cielo de nubes plomizas. Evitábamos, Molly y yo, las confidencias complicadas. Además, ella ya sabía a qué atenerse. Era demasiado sincera como para tener demasiadas cosas que decir sobre una pena. Lo que ocurría dentro le bastaba, en su corazón. Nos besábamos. Pero yo no la besaba bien, como debería haberlo hecho, de rodillas, en realidad. Siempre pensaba en otra cosa a la vez, en no perder tiempo ni ternura, como si quisiera guardar todo para algo, no sé qué, magnífico, sublime, para más adelante, pero no para Molly, no para aquello. Como si la vida fuera a llevarse, a ocultarme, lo que yo quería saber de ella, de la vida en el fondo de las tinieblas, mientras perdiese fervor abrazado a Molly, y entonces ya no fuera a quedar bastante, fuese a haber perdido todo, a fin de cuentas, por falta de fuerza, la vida fuera a haberme engañado como a todos los demás, la Vida, la auténtica querida de los hombres de verdad.

Volvíamos hacia la muchedumbre y después yo la dejaba delante de su casa, porque por la noche estaba ocupada con la clientela hasta la madrugada. Mientras se encargaba de sus clientes, yo sentía pena, de todos modos, y aquella pena me hablaba de ella tan bien, que la sentía aún más cerca de mí que en la realidad. Entraba en un cine para pasar el rato. A la salida del cine, montaba a un tranvía, aquí y allá, y deambulaba en la noche. Después de dar las dos, subían los viajeros tímidos de una clase que no se encuentra ni antes ni después de esa hora, tan pálidos siempre y somnolientos, en grupos dóciles, hasta los suburbios.

Con ellos se llegaba lejos. Mucho más lejos que las fábricas, hacia colonias imprecisas, callejuelas de casas indistintas. Sobre el pavimento resbaladizo por las finas lluvias del amanecer, el día brillaba con tonos azules. Mis compañeros del tranvía desaparecían al mismo tiempo que sus sombras. Cerraban los ojos con el día. Costaba trabajo hacerles hablar, a aquellos taciturnos. Demasiada fatiga. No se quejaban, no, ellos eran quienes limpiaban durante la noche tiendas y más tiendas y las oficinas de toda la ciudad, después del cierre. Parecían menos inquietos que nosotros, los de la jornada diurna. Tal vez porque habían llegado, ellos, al nivel más bajo de los hombres y las cosas.

Una de aquellas noches, cuando habíamos llegado al final del trayecto y estábamos apeándonos en silencio, me pareció que me llamaban por mi nombre: «¡Ferdinand! ¡Eh, Ferdinand!» Fue como un escándalo, por fuerza, en aquella penumbra. No me gustó nada. Por encima de los tejados, el cielo empezaba a aparecer de nuevo en pequeños claros muy fríos, recortados por los aleros. Ya lo creo que me llamaban. Al volverme, lo reconocí al instante, a Leon. Se me acercó susurrando y entonces nos pusimos a hablar.

También él volvía de limpiar una oficina como los otros. Era lo único que había encontrado para ir tirando. Caminaba con mucha calma, con cierta majestad auténtica, como si acabara de realizar acciones peligrosas y, por así decir, sagradas en la ciudad. Por cierto, que ésa era la actitud que adoptaban todos aquellos limpiadores nocturnos, ya lo había notado yo. En la fatiga y la soledad se manifiesta lo divino en los hombres. Lo manifestaba con ganas en los ojos, también él, cuando los abría mucho más de lo habitual, en la penumbra azulada en que nos encontrábamos. También él había limpiado ya filas y filas, sin fin, de lavabos y había dejado relucientes auténticas montañas de pisos y más pisos de silencio.

Añadió: «¡Te he reconocido en seguida, Ferdinand! Por tu forma de subir al tranvía… Figúrate, sólo de ver que te has puesto triste al descubrir que no había ninguna mujer. ¿Eh? ¿A que es propio de ti?» Era verdad que era propio de mí. Estaba visto, tenía el alma hecha una braga. No había, pues, motivo para que me sorprendiera aquella observación correcta. Pero lo que me sorprendió más bien fue que tampoco él hubiese triunfado en América. No era lo que había yo previsto.

Le hablé de la faena de la galera en San Tapeta. Pero no comprendía lo que quería decir. «¡Tienes fiebre!», se limitó a responderme. En un carguero había llegado él. Con gusto habría intentado colocarse en la Ford, pero no se había atrevido por sus papeles, demasiado falsos para enseñarlos. «Tan sólo sirven para llevarlos en el bolsillo», comentaba. Para los equipos de limpieza, no eran demasiado exigentes respecto al estado civil. Tampoco pagaban demasiado, pero hacían la vista gorda. Era una especie de legión extranjera de la noche.

«Y tú, ¿qué haces? – me preguntó entonces-. ¿Sigues chiflado, entonces? ¿Aún no te has cansado de estas historias? ¿Aún sigues queriendo viajar?»

«Quiero volver a Francia -fui y le dije-. Ya he visto bastante, tienes razón, ya vale…»

«Mejor será -me respondió-, porque para nosotros no hay nada que arrascar… Hemos envejecido sin enterarnos, ya sé yo lo que es eso… A mí también me gustaría volver, pero sigo con el problema de los papeles… Voy a esperar un poco para conseguirme unos buenos… No se puede decir que sea malo nuestro currelo. Los hay peores. Pero no aprendo el inglés… Hay gente que lleva treinta años en la limpieza y sólo ha aprendido en total *Exit,* porque está escrito en las puertas que limpiamos, y además *Lavatory*. ¿Comprendes?»

Comprendía. Si alguna vez hubiera llegado a faltarme Molly, me habría visto obligado a coger también aquel currelo nocturno.

No hay razón para que la cosa acabe.

En una palabra, mientras estás en la guerra, dices que será mejor con la paz y después te tragas esa esperanza, como si fuera un caramelo, y luego resulta que es mierda pura. No te atreves a decirlo al principio para no fastidiar a nadie. Te muestras amable, en una palabra. Y después un buen día acabas descubriendo el pastel delante de todo el mundo. Estás hasta los huevos de revolverte en la mierda. Pero de repente pareces

muy mal educado a todo el mundo. Y se acabó.

En dos o tres ocasiones después de aquélla, nos citamos, Robinson y yo. Tenía muy mala pinta. Un desertor francés que fabricaba licores ilegales para los tunelas de Detroit le había cedido un rinconcito en su *business*. Eso lo tentaba, a Robinson. «Yo también haría un poco de "priva" para esos cerdos -me confiaba-, pero es que ya no tengo cojones… Siento que en cuanto el primer guri me dé para el pelo, me rajo… He visto demasiado… Y, además, tengo sueño todo el tiempo… Por fuerza: dormir de día no es dormir… Y eso sin contar el polvo de las oficinas que te llena los pulmones… ¿Te das cuenta?… Acaba con cualquiera…»

Nos citamos para otra noche. Fui a reunirme con Molly y le conté todo. Para ocultarme la pena que le causaba, hizo muchos esfuerzos, pero no era difícil ver, de todos modos, que sufría. Ahora la besaba yo más a menudo, pero la suya era una pena profunda, más auténtica que la nuestra, porque nosotros más bien tenemos la costumbre de exagerarla. Las americanas, al contrario. No nos atrevemos a comprender, a admitirla. Es un poco humillante, pero, aun así, es pena sin duda, no es orgullo, no son celos tampoco, ni escenas, sólo la pena de verdad del corazón y no nos queda más remedio que reconocer que todo eso no existe en nuestro interior, que para el placer de sentir pena estamos secos. Nos da vergüenza no ser más ricos de corazón y de todo y también haber juzgado, de todos modos, a la humanidad más vil de lo que en el fondo es.

De vez en cuando, cedía a la tentación, Molly, de hacerme un pequeño reproche, pero siempre en términos mesurados, muy amables.

«Eres muy cariñoso, Ferdinand -me decía-, y sé que haces esfuerzos para no volverte tan malvado como los demás, sólo que no sé si sabes bien lo que deseas en el fondo… ¡Piénsalo bien! Por fuerza tendrás que buscarte el sustento allá, Ferdinand… Y, además, no vas a poder pasearte como aquí soñando despierto noche tras noche… Como tanto te gusta hacer… Mientras yo trabajo… ¿Has pensado en eso, Ferdinand?»

En un sentido tenía mil veces razón, pero cada cual con su naturaleza. Yo tenía miedo a herirla. Sobre todo porque era fácil de herir.

«Te aseguro que te quiero, Molly, y te querré siempre… como puedo… a mi modo.»

Mi modo no era demasiado. Y, sin embargo, estaba buena, Molly, muy apetitosa. Pero yo sentía también aquella estúpida inclinación por los fantasmas. Tal vez no fuera del todo culpa mía. La vida te obliga a quedarte demasiado tiempo con los fantasmas.

«Eres muy afectuoso, Ferdinand -me tranquilizaba ella-, no llores por mí… Estás como enfermo por tu deseo de saber siempre más… Eso es todo… En fin, debe de ser ése tu camino… Por ahí, solo… El viajero solitario es el que llega más lejos… ¿Vas a marcharte pronto, entonces?»

«Sí, voy a acabar mis estudios en Francia y después volveré», le aseguré con mucho rostro.

«No, Ferdinand, no volverás… Y, además, yo ya no estaré aquí tampoco…»

No se dejaba engañar.

Llegó el momento de la marcha. Fuimos una tarde hacia la estación un poco antes de la hora en que ella entraba a trabajar. Antes yo había ido a despedirme de Robinson. Tampoco él estaba contento de que lo dejara. Me pasaba la vida abandonando a todo el mundo. En el andén de la estación, mientras Molly y yo esperábamos el tren, pasaron hombres que fingieron no reconocerla, pero murmuraban.

«Ya estás lejos, Ferdinand. Haces exactamente lo que deseas hacer, ¿no, Ferdinand? Eso es lo importante… Lo único que cuenta…»

Entró el tren en la estación. Yo ya no estaba demasiado seguro de mi aventura, cuando vi la máquina. Besé a Molly con todo el valor que me quedaba en el cuerpo. Me daba pena, pena de verdad, por una vez, todo el mundo, ella, todos los hombres.

Tal vez sea eso lo que busquemos a lo largo de la vida, nada más que eso, la mayor pena posible para llegar a ser uno mismo antes de morir.

Años pasaron desde aquella marcha y más años… Escribí con frecuencia a Detroit y después a todas las direcciones que recordaba y donde podían conocerla, a Molly, saber de su vida. Nunca recibí respuesta.

Ahora la casa está cerrada. Eso es lo único que he sabido. Buena, admirable Molly, si aún puede leerme, desde un lugar que no conozco, quiero que sepa sin duda que yo no he cambiado para ella, que sigo amándola y siempre la amaré a mi modo, que puede venir aquí, cuando quiera compartir mi pan y mi furtivo destino. Si ya no es bella, ¡mala suerte! ¡Nos arreglaremos! He guardado tanta belleza de ella en mí, tan viva, tan cálida, que aún me queda para los dos y para por lo menos veinte años aún, el tiempo de llegar al fin.

Para dejarla, necesité, desde luego, mucha locura y un carácter chungo y frío. Aun así, he defendido mi alma hasta ahora y Molly me regaló tanto cariño y ensueño en aquellos meses de América, que, si viniera mañana la muerte a buscarme, nunca llegaría a estar, estoy seguro, tan frío, ruin y grosero como los otros.

¡No acaba todo con haber regresado del Otro Mundo! Te vuelves a encontrar con el hilo de los días tirado por ahí, pringoso, precario. Te espera.

Anduve aún semanas y meses por los alrededores de la Place Clichy, de donde había salido, y por las cercanías también, haciendo trabajillos para vivir, por Batignolles. ¡Mejor no contarlo! Bajo la lluvia o en el calor de los autos, en pleno junio, un calor que te quema la garganta y el interior de la nariz, casi como en la Ford. Miraba para distraerme pasar y pasar, a la gente, camino del teatro o del Bois, al atardecer.

Siempre más o menos solo durante las horas libres, pasaba el rato con libros y periódicos y también con todas las cosas que había visto. Reanudados los estudios, fui pasando los exámenes a trancas y barrancas, al tiempo que me ganaba las habichuelas. Está bien defendida la Ciencia, os lo aseguro; la Facultad es un

armario bien cerrado. Muchos tarros y poca confitura. De todos modos, cuando hube terminado mis cinco o seis años de tribulaciones académicas, obtuve mi título, muy rimbombante. Entonces me apalanqué en los suburbios, como correspondía a mi estilo, en La Garenne-Rancy, ahí, a la salida de París, justo después de la Porte Brancion.

Yo no tenía pretensiones ni ambición tampoco, sólo el deseo de respirar un poco y de jalar algo mejor. Tras poner la placa en la puerta, esperé.

La gente del barrio vino, recelosa, a contemplar mi placa. Fueron incluso a preguntar en la comisaría de policía si era yo médico de verdad. Sí, les respondieron. Tiene el título, lo es. Entonces se repitió por todo Rancy que acababa de instalarse un médico de verdad, además de los otros. «¡Se va a morir de hambre! –predijo en seguida mi portera-. ¡Ya hay pero que demasiados médicos por aquí!» Y era una observación exacta.

En los suburbios, la vida llega, por la mañana, sobre todo en los tranvías. Pasaban a montones con multitudes de atontolinados bamboleantes, desde el amanecer, por el Boulevard Minotaure, que bajaban hacia el currelo.

Los jóvenes parecían incluso contentos de ir al currelo. Aceleraban el tráfico, se aferraban a los estribos, los monines, cachondeándose. Hay que ver. Pero, cuando hace veinte años que conoces la cabina telefónica de la tasca, por ejemplo, tan sucia, que siempre la confundes con el retrete, se te quitan las ganas de bromear con las cosas serias y con Rancy, en particular. Entonces comprendes dónde te han metido. Las casas te obsesionan, impregnadas todas de orines y con fachadas tétricas; su corazón es del propietario. A ése no lo ves nunca. No se atrevería a aparecer. Envía a su administrador, el muy cabrón. Sin embargo, en el barrio dicen que se muestra muy amable, el casero, cuando se lo encuentran. Eso no compromete a nada.

La luz del cielo en Rancy es la misma que en Detroit, jugo de humo que empapa la llanura desde Levallois. Un desecho de casas destartaladas y sostenidas en el suelo por montañas de basura negra. Las chimeneas, altas y bajas, se parecen de lejos a los postes hundidos en el cieno a la orilla del mar. Ahí dentro estamos nosotros.

Hay que tener el valor de los cangrejos también, en Rancy, sobre todo cuando te vas haciendo mayor y estás seguro de que no volverás a salir de allí. Junto a la última parada del tranvía, ahí queda el puente pringoso que se lanza por encima del Sena, enorme cloaca al desnudo. A lo largo de las orillas, los domingos y por las noches la gente trepa a los ribazos para hacer pipí. A los hombres eso los pone meditabundos, sentirse ante el agua que pasa. Orinan con un sentimiento de eternidad, como marinos. Las mujeres, ésas no meditan nunca. Con Sena o sin Sena. Por la mañana, el tranvía lleva, pues, a su multitud a apretujarse en el metro. Parece, al verlos escapar a todos en esa dirección, como si les hubiese ocurrido una catástrofe hacia Argenteuil, como si ardiera su tierra. Después de cada aurora, vuelve a darles, se aferran por racimos a las portezuelas, a las barandillas. Gran desbarajuste. Y, sin embargo, lo que van a buscar a París es un patrón, el que te salva de cascar de hambre, tienen un miedo cerval a perderlo, los muy cobardes. Ahora bien, te la hace transpirar, su pitanza, el patrón. Apestas durante diez años, veinte años y más. No es de balde.

Ya en el tranvía, para hacer boca, unas broncas que para qué. Las mujeres son aún más protestonas que los mocosos. Por colarse sin pagar, serían capaces de paralizar toda la línea. Es cierto que algunas de las pasajeras van ya borrachas, sobre todo las que bajan al mercado hacia Saint-Ouen, las de «quiero y no puedo». «¿A cuánto van las zanahorias?», van y preguntan mucho antes de llegar para hacer ver que tienen con qué.

Comprimidos como basuras en la caja de hierro, atravesamos todo Rancy y con un olor que echa para atrás, sobre todo en verano. En las fortificaciones, se amenazan, se insultan una última vez y después se pierden de vista, el metro se traga a todos y todo, trajes empapados, vestidos arrugados, medias de seda, metritis y pies sucios como calcetines, cuellos indesgastables y rígidos como vencimientos, abortos en curso, héroes de guerra, todo eso baja chorreando por la escalera con olor a alquitrán y ácido fénico y hasta la obscuridad, con el billete de vuelta, que cuesta, él solo, tanto como dos barritas de pan.

La lenta angustia del despido sin explicaciones (con un simple certificado) siempre acechando a los que llegan tarde, cuando el patrón quiera reducir sus gastos generales. Recuerdos de la «crisis» a flor de piel, de la última vez en el desempleo, de todos los periódicos con anuncios que se hubo de leer, cinco reales, cinco reales… de las esperas para buscar currelo. Esos recuerdos bastan para estrangular a un hombre, por muy abrigado que vaya en su gabán «para todas las estaciones».

La ciudad oculta como puede sus muchedumbres de pies sucios en sus largas cloacas eléctricas. No volverán a la superficie hasta el domingo. Entonces, cuando estén fuera, más valdrá quedarse en casa. Un solo domingo viéndolas distraerse bastaría para quitarte para siempre las ganas de broma. En torno al metro, cerca de los bastiones, cruje, endémico, el olor de las guerras que colean, de los tufos de aldeas a medio quemar, a medio cocer, de las revoluciones que abortan, de los comercios en quiebra. Los traperos de la zona llevan siglos quemando los mismos montoncitos húmedos en las zanjas al abrigo del viento. Son unos bárbaros maletas, esos traperos, presa de la priva y la fatiga. Van a toser al dispensario contiguo, en lugar de tirar los tranvías por los taludes e ir a echar una buena meada en la oficina de arbitrios. Ya no hay cojones. Digan lo que digan. Cuando vuelva la guerra, la próxima, volverán a hacer fortuna vendiendo pieles de ratas, cocaína, máscaras de chapa ondulada.

Yo había encontrado, para ejercer la profesión, un pisito cerca de las chabolas, desde donde veía bien los taludes y al obrero que siempre está en lo alto, mirando al vacío, con el brazo en cabestrillo, herido en accidente laboral, que ya no sabe qué hacer ni en qué pensar y que no tiene bastante para ir a beber y llenarse

la conciencia.

Molly tenía más razón que una santa, empezaba yo a comprenderla. Los estudios te cambian, te infunden orgullo. Hay que pasar sin falta por ellos para entrar en el fondo de la vida. Antes, lo único que haces es dar vueltas en torno a ella. Te consideras hombre libre, pero tropiezas con naderías. Sueñas demasiado. Patinas con todas las palabras. No es eso, no es eso. Sólo son intenciones, apariencias. El decidido necesita otra cosa. Con la medicina, yo, no demasiado capaz, me había aproximado bastante, de todos modos, a los hombres, a los animales, a todo. Ahora lo único que había que hacer era lanzarse sin dudar al montón. La muerte corre tras ti, tienes que darte prisa y comer también, mientras buscas, y, encima, esquivar la guerra. La tira de cosas que realizar. No es fácil.

Entretanto, pacientes no eran muchos precisamente los que acudían. Hace falta tiempo para arrancar, me decían para tranquilizarme. El enfermo, por el momento, era sobre todo yo.

No hay nada más lamentable que La Garenne-Rancy, me parecía, cuando no tienes clientes. La pura verdad. Valdría más no pensar en esos lugares, ¡y yo que había ido precisamente para pensar tranquilo y desde el otro extremo de la Tierra! Estaba guapo. ¡Pobre orgulloso! Se me cayó el mundo encima, pesado y negro… No era como para echarse a reír y, además, no había modo de quitármelo de encima. Menudo tirano es el cerebro, no hay otro igual.

En la planta baja de mi casa vivía Bézin, el modesto chamarilero que me decía siempre, cuando me detenía ante su tienda: «¡Hay que elegir, doctor! ¡Apostar en las carreras o tomar el aperitivo! ¡Una cosa u otra!… ¡Todo no se puede hacer!… ¡Yo el aperitivo es lo que prefiero! No me gusta el juego…»

El aperitivo que prefería era el de «genciana-casis». No era mal tipo, por lo general, pero, después de darle a la priva, un poco atravesado… Cuando iba a abastecerse al Mercado de las Pulgas, se pasaba tres días sin volver a casa, en «expedición», como él decía. Lo volvían a traer. Entonces profetizaba:

«El porvenir ya veo yo cómo va a ser… Como una orgía interminable va a ser… Y con cine dentro… Basta con ver cómo es ya…»

Veía más lejos incluso en esos casos: «Veo también que habrán dejado de beber… Soy el último, yo, que bebe en el porvenir… Tengo que darme prisa… Conozco mi vicio…»

Todo el mundo tosía en mi calle. Eso mantiene ocupada a la gente. Para ver el sol, hay que subir por lo menos hasta el Sacré-Coeur, por culpa de los humos.

Desde allí sí que hay una vista magnífica; te dabas cuenta de que allá, en el fondo de la llanura, estábamos nosotros y las casas donde vivíamos. Pero, cuando las buscabas con detalle, no las encontrabas, ni siquiera la tuya, de tan feo que era, tan feo y tan parecido, todo lo que veías.

Más al fondo aún, el Sena, que no deja de circular, como un gran moco en zigzag de un puente a otro.

Cuando vives en Rancy, ya ni siquiera te das cuenta de que te has vuelto triste. Ya no te quedan ganas de hacer gran cosa y se acabó. A fuerza de hacer economías en todo, por todo, se te han pasado todos los deseos.

Durante meses, pedí dinero prestado aquí y allá. La gente era tan pobre y desconfiada en mi barrio, que había de ser de noche para que se decidieran a llamarme, a mí, pese a ser médico barato. Pasé así noches y más noches buscando diez francos o quince francos por los patinillos sin luna.

Por la mañana, la calle se volvía como un gran tambor de alfombras sacudidas.

Aquella mañana, me encontré a Bébert en la acera, estaba guardando la portería de su tía, que había salido a hacer la compra. También él levantaba una nube de la acera con una escoba, Bébert.

Quien no levantara polvo por aquellos andurriales, hacia las siete de la mañana, sería un guarro de tomo y lomo para los de su propia calle. Alfombras sacudidas, señal de limpieza, casa decente. Con eso basta. Ya te puede apestar la boca, que, después de eso, estás tranquilo. Bébert se tragaba todo el polvo que levantaba y también el que le enviaban desde los pisos. Sin embargo, llegaban hasta los adoquines algunas manchas de sol, pero como en el interior de una iglesia, pálidas y tamizadas, místicas.

Bébert me había visto llegar. Yo era el médico de la esquina, donde para el autobús. Piel demasiado verdusca, manzana que nunca maduraría, Bébert. Se rascaba y de verlo me daban ganas a mí también, de rascarme. Es que también yo tenía pulgas, cierto es, que me pegaban los enfermos por las noches. Te saltan con gusto al abrigo, porque es el lugar más caliente y húmedo que se presenta. Eso te lo enseñan en la Facultad.

Bébert abandonó su alfombra para darme los buenos días. Desde todas las ventanas nos miraban hablar.

Mientras haya que amar a alguien, se corre menos riesgo con los niños que con los hombres, tienes al menos la excusa de esperar que sean menos cabrones que nosotros más adelante. Qué poco sabíamos.

Por su cara lívida bailaba aquella infinita sonrisa de afecto puro que nunca he podido olvidar. Una alegría para el universo.

Pocos seres, pasados los veinte años, conservan aún un poquito de ese afecto fácil, el de los animales. ¡El mundo no es lo que creíamos! ¡Y se acabó! Conque, ¡hemos cambiado de jeta! ¡Y menudo cambio! ¡Por habernos equivocado! ¡Perfectos cabrones nos volvemos en un dos por tres! ¡Eso es lo que nos queda en la cara pasados los veinte años! ¡Un error! Nuestra cara es un puro error.

«¡Eh -va y me dice Bébert-, doctor! ¿A que han recogido a uno en la Place des Fétes esta noche? ¿A que le habían cortado el cuello con una navaja? Era usted el que estaba de servicio, ¿verdad?»

«No, no estaba yo de servicio, Bébert, yo no, era el doctor Frolichon…»

«¡Qué pena! Porque mi tía ha dicho que le habría gustado que hubiera sido usted… Que se lo habría

contado todo…»

«Habrá que esperar a la próxima vez, Bébert.»

«Pasa mucho, ¿eh?, eso de que maten a gente por aquí», comentó también Bébert.

Atravesé su polvo, pero en aquel preciso instante pasaba la máquina barredora municipal, zumbando, y un gran tifón saltó del arroyo y colmó toda la calle de más nubes aún, más densas, de color pimienta. Ya no nos veíamos. Bébert saltaba de derecha a izquierda, estornudando y gritando, contento. Su cara ojerosa, sus cabellos pringosos, sus piernas de mono tísico, todo eso bailaba, convulsivo, en la punta de la escoba.

La tía de Bébert volvía de la compra, ya había pimplado lo suyo, también hemos de decir que aspiraba un poco el éter, hábito contraído cuando servía en casa de un médico y había sufrido mucho con las muelas del juicio. Ya sólo le quedaban dos de los dientes delanteros, pero siempre se los lavaba sin falta. «Cuando, como yo, se ha servido en casa de un médico, se sabe lo que es la higiene.» Daba consultas médicas por el vecindario e incluso bastante lejos, hasta Bezons.

Me habría gustado saber si alguna vez pensaba en algo, la tía de Bébert. No, no pensaba en nada. Hablaba sin parar y sin pensar nunca. Cuando estábamos a solas, sin indiscretos alrededor, me hacía una consulta de balde. Era halagador, en cierto sentido.

«Mire, doctor, tengo que decírselo, ya que es usted médico, ¡Bébert es un cochino!… "Se toca" Me di cuenta hace dos meses y me gustaría saber quién ha podido enseñarle esas guarrerías… ¡Y eso que lo he educado bien! Se lo prohibo… Pero vuelve a empezar…»

«Dígale que se volverá loco», le aconsejé, clásico.

Bébert, que nos estaba escuchando, no estaba de acuerdo.

«No me toco, no es verdad, fue ese chavea, el de los Gagat, quien me propuso…»

«¿Ve usted? Ya sospechaba yo -dijo la tía-. Los Gagat, ya sabe usted quiénes digo, los del quinto… Son todos unos viciosos. Al abuelo parece ser que le iba la marcha… ¿Eh? ¡Fíjese usted!… Oiga, doctor, ya que estamos, ¿no podría recetarle un jarabe para que no se toque?…»

La seguí hasta la portería para prescribir un jarabe antivicio para el chavalín Bébert. Yo era demasiado complaciente con todo el mundo y lo sabía de sobra. Nadie me pagaba. Visitaba de balde, sobre todo por curiosidad. Es un error. La gente se venga de los favores que le haces. La tía de Bébert aprovechó, como los demás, mi desinterés orgulloso. Abusó incluso más que la hostia. Yo me hacía el tonto, les dejaba mentirme. Les seguía la corriente. Me tenían en sus manos, lloriqueaban, los enfermos, cada día más, me tenían a su merced. Al mismo tiempo, me mostraban, bajeza tras bajeza, todo lo que disimulaban en la trastienda de su alma y que no enseñaban a nadie, salvo a mí. No hay dinero para pagar esos horrores. Se te cuelan entre los dedos como serpientes viscosas.

Un día lo contaré todo, si llego a vivir bastante.

«¡Mirad, asquerosos! Dejadme ser amable algunos años más aún. No me matéis todavía. Dejadme parecer servil y desgraciado, lo contaré todo. Os lo aseguro y entonces os doblaréis de golpe, como las orugas babosas que en África venían a cagarse en mi choza, y os volveré más sutilmente cobardes e inmundos aún, tanto, pero es que tanto, que tal vez la diñéis, por fin».

«¿Es dulce?», preguntaba Bébert a propósito del jarabe.

«Sobre todo, no se lo recete dulce -recomendó la tía- a este pillo… No merece que sea dulce y, además, ¡bastante azúcar me roba ya! Tiene todos los vicios, ¡una cara muy dura! ¡Acabará asesinando a su madre!»

«Pero, ¡si no tengo madre!», replicó, rotundo, Bébert, siempre tan campante.

«¡Me cago en la leche! – dijo entonces la tía-. Como me contestes, te voy a dar una tunda, ¡que vas a saber tú lo que es bueno!» Y fue y se dirigió hacia él, pero Bébert había salido ya corriendo hacia la calle. «¡Viciosa!», le gritó en pleno corredor. La tía se puso colorada como un tomate y volvió hacia mí. Cambiamos de conversación.

«Tal vez debiera usted, doctor, ir a ver a los del entresuelo del 4 de la Rué des Mineures… Es un antiguo empleado de notaría, le han hablado de usted… Yo le he dicho que era el médico más amable con los enfermos que conozco.»

Al instante supe que me estaba mintiendo, la tía. Su médico preferido era Frolichon. Era el que recomendaba siempre, cuando podía; a mí, al contrario, me ponía verde en todo momento. Mi humanitarismo provocaba en ella un odio animal. Era un bicho, no hay que olvidarlo. Sólo, que Frolichon, a quien ella admiraba, le hacía pagar al contado, conque iba y me consultaba de balde. Para que me hubiera recomendado, tenía que ser, pues, otra consulta gratuita o, si no, un asunto muy sucio. Al marcharme, pensé, de todos modos, en Bébert.

«Hay que sacarlo -le dije-, no sale bastante ese niño…»

«¿Adonde quiere que vayamos? Con la portería no puedo ir demasiado lejos…»

«Llévelo por lo menos al parque, los domingos…»

«Pero si hay más gente y polvo que aquí, en el parque… Parecemos sardinas en lata.»

Su observación era pertinente. Busqué otro lugar que aconsejarle.

Tímidamente, le propuse el cementerio.

El cementerio de La Garenne-Rancy es el único espacio un poco arbolado y de cierta extensión por esa zona.

«¡Hombre, es verdad! No se me había ocurrido. ¡Podríamos ir allí!»

Justo entonces volvía Bébert.

«¿Y a ti, Bébert? ¿Te gustaría ir de paseo al cementerio? Tengo que preguntárselo, doctor, porque para los paseos también es terco como una mula, ¡se lo aseguro!…»

Precisamente Bébert carecía de opinión. Pero la idea gustó a la tía y eso bastaba. Sentía debilidad por los cementerios, la tía, como todos los parisinos. Parecía como si, a propósito de eso, se fuera a poner por fin a pensar. Examinaba los pros y los contras. Las fortificaciones están llenas de golfos… En el parque hay demasiado polvo, eso desde luego… Mientras que en el cementerio, es verdad, no se está mal… Y, además, la que allí va los domingos es gente bastante decente y que sabe comportarse… Y, además, lo que es muy cómodo es que se puede hacer la compra de vuelta por el Boulevard de la Liberté, donde aún hay tiendas abiertas los domingos.

Y concluyó: «Bébert, lleva al doctor a casa de la señora Henrouille, Rué des Mineures… ¿Sabes dónde vive, eh, Bébert, la señora Henrouille?»

Bébert sabía dónde estaba todo, con tal de que fuera oportunidad para dar un garbeo.

Entre la Rué Ventru y la Place Lénine ya casi todas eran casas de alquiler. Los constructores habían cogido casi todo el campo que aún había allí, Les Garennes, como lo llamaban. Ya sólo quedaba un poquito, hacia el final, algunos solares, después del último farol de gas.

Encajonados entre los edificios, enmohecían así algunos hotelitos resistentes, cuatro habitaciones con una gran estufa en el pasillo de abajo; apenas encendían el fuego, cierto es, por economizar. Humea con la humedad. Eran hotelitos de rentistas, los que quedaban. En cuanto entrabas, tosías con el humo. No eran rentistas ricos los que habían quedado por allí, no, sobre todo los Henrouille, donde me habían enviado. Pero, aun así, eran gente que poseía alguna cosilla.

Al entrar, olía de lo lindo, en casa de los Henrouille, además del humo, el retrete y el guiso. Acababan de pagar su hotelito. Eso representaba sus cincuenta buenos años de economías. En cuanto entrabas en su casa y los veías, te preguntabas qué les pasaba, a los dos. Bueno, pues, lo que les pasaba, a los Henrouille, lo que en ellos parecía natural, era que nunca habían gastado, durante cincuenta años, un solo céntimo, ninguno de los dos, sin haberlo lamentado. Con su carne y su espíritu habían adquirido su casa, como el caracol. Pero el caracol lo hace sin darse cuenta.

Los Henrouille, en cambio, no salían de su asombro por haber pasado por la vida nada más que para tener una casa e, igual que las personas a las que acaban de sacar de un encierro entre cuatro paredes, les resultaba extraño. Debe de poner una cara muy rara la gente, cuando la sacan de una mazmorra.

Desde antes de casarse, ya pensaban, los Henrouille, en comprarse una casa. Por separado, primero, y, después, juntos. Se habían negado a pensar en otra cosa durante medio siglo y, cuando la vida los había obligado a pensar en otra cosa, en la guerra, por ejemplo, y sobre todo en su hijo, se habían puesto enfermos a morir.

Cuando se habían instalado en su hotelito, recién casados, con sus diez años ya de ahorros cada uno, no estaba acabado del todo. Estaba situado aún en medio del campo, el hotelito. Para llegar hasta él, en invierno, había que coger los zuecos; los dejaban en la frutería de la esquina de la Révolte, al ir, por la mañana, al currelo, a las seis, en la parada del tranvía tirado por caballos, para París, a tres kilómetros de allí, por veinte céntimos.

Hace falta buena salud para perseverar toda una vida en régimen semejante. Su retrato estaba encima de la cama, en el primer piso, sacado el día de la boda. También estaban pagados la alcoba y los muebles y desde hacía mucho incluso. Por cierto, que todas las facturas pagadas desde hace diez, veinte, cuarenta años estaban guardadas juntas y grapadas en el cajón de arriba de la cómoda y el libro de cuentas, totalmente al día, estaba abajo, en el comedor, donde nunca se comía. Henrouille te lo podía enseñar todo aquello, si lo deseabas. El sábado era él quien se encargaba de hacer el balance de cuentas en el comedor. Ellos siempre habían comido en la cocina.

Fui enterándome de todo aquello, poco a poco, por ellos y por otros y también por la tía de Bébert. Cuando los conocí mejor, me contaron ellos mismos su terror, el de toda su vida, el de que su hijo único, lanzado al comercio, hiciera malos negocios. Durante treinta años los había hecho despertarse casi cada noche, poco o mucho, ese siniestro pensamiento. ¡Una tienda de plumas, tenía el chico! ¡Imaginaos si ha habido crisis en el ramo de las plumas desde hace treinta años! Tal vez no haya habido un negocio peor que el de la pluma, más inseguro.

Hay negocios tan malos, que ni siquiera se le ocurre a uno pedir dinero prestado para sacarlos a flote, pero hay otros que siempre andan con préstamos a vueltas. Cuando pensaban en un préstamo así, aun ahora con la casa pagada y todo, se levantaban de sus sillas, los Henrouille, y se miraban rojos como tomates. ¿Qué habrían hecho ellos en un caso así? Se habrían negado.

Habían decidido desde siempre negarse a cualquier préstamo… Por los principios, para guardarle un peculio, una herencia y una casa, a su hijo, el Patrimonio. Así razonaban. Hijo serio, desde luego, el suyo, pero en los negocios puedes verte arrastrado…

A todas las preguntas respondía yo igual que ellos.

Mi madre, también, se dedicaba al comercio; nunca nos había aportado otra cosa que miserias, su comercio, un poco de pan y muchos quebraderos de cabeza. Conque a mí no me gustaban tampoco, los negocios. El riesgo de ese hijo, el peligro de esa idea de préstamo, que habría podido, en último caso,

acariciar, en caso de dificultades con un vencimiento, lo comprendía a la primera. No hacía falta explicarme. Él, Henrouille padre, había sido pasante de un notario en el Boulevard Sebastopol durante cincuenta años. Conque, ¡menudo si conocía historias de dilapidación de fortunas! Incluso me contó algunas tremendas. La de su propio padre, en primer lugar; e incluso por la quiebra de su propio padre precisamente no había podido hacer la carrera de profesor, Henrouille, después del bachillerato, y había tenido que colocarse en seguida de escribiente. Son cosas que no se olvidan.

Por fin, con la casa pagada, suya y bien suya, sin un céntimo de deudas, ¡ya no tenían que preocuparse, los dos, por la seguridad! Habían cumplido los sesenta y seis años.

Y, mira por dónde, fue él, entonces, y empezó a sentirse indispuesto o, mejor dicho, hacía mucho que la sentía, esa indisposición, pero antes no hacía caso, con lo de la casa por pagar. Una vez que ésta fue asunto liquidado y concluido, firmado y bien firmado, se puso a pensar en su dichosa indisposición. Como mareos y después pitidos de vapor en cada oído le daban.

Fue también por aquella época cuando empezó a comprar el periódico, ¡ya que en adelante podían muy bien permitirse ese lujo! Precisamente en el periódico aparecía escrito y descrito todo lo que él sentía, Henrouille, en los oídos. Conque compró el medicamento que recomendaba el anuncio, pero no había experimentado el menor cambio; al contrario: parecían habérsele intensificado los pitidos. ¿Tal vez sólo de pensarlo? De todos modos, fueron juntos a consultar al médico del dispensario. «Es la presión arterial», les dijo éste.

La frase le había impresionado. Pero, en el fondo, aquella obsesión le aparecía en momento muy oportuno. Se había quemado la sangre tanto y durante tantos años, por la casa y los vencimientos de su hijo, que había algo así como un espacio libre de repente en la trama de angustias que lo tenían acogotado desde hacía cuarenta años con los vencimientos y alimentaban su constante fervor temeroso. Ahora que el médico le había hablado de su presión arterial, la escuchaba, su tensión, latir contra la almohada, en el fondo de su oído. Se levantaba incluso para tomarse el pulso y después se quedaba muy inmóvil, junto a la cama, de noche, mucho rato, para sentir su cuerpo estremecerse con leves sacudidas, cada vez que latía su corazón. Era su muerte, se decía, todo aquello, siempre había tenido miedo a la vida, ahora vinculaba su miedo a algo, a la muerte, a su tensión, igual que lo había vinculado durante cuarenta años al peligro de no poder acabar de pagar la casa.

Seguía siendo desgraciado, igual, pero ahora tenía que apresurarse a buscar una nueva razón válida para serlo. No es tan fácil como parece. No basta con decirse: «Soy desgraciado.» Además, hay que demostrárselo, convencerse sin remedio. No pedía otra cosa él: poder encontrar para el miedo que sentía un motivo bien sólido y válido de verdad. Tenía 22 de tensión, según el médico. No es moco de pavo 22. El médico le había enseñado a encontrar el camino de su muerte.

El dichoso hijo, comerciante en plumas, casi nunca aparecía. Una o dos veces por Año Nuevo. Y se acabó. Pero ahora, ¡ya podía venir, ya, el comerciante en plumas! Ya no había nada que pedir prestado a papá y mamá. Conque ya apenas iba a verlos, el hijo.

A la señora Henrouille, en cambio, tardé algún tiempo más en llegar a conocerla; ella, en cambio, no sufría de ninguna angustia, ni siquiera la de su muerte, que no era capaz de imaginar. Se quejaba sólo de su edad, pero sin pensarlo de verdad, por hacer como todo el mundo, y también de que la vida «subía». Su difícil misión estaba cumplida. La casa pagada. Para liquidar las letras más rápido, las últimas, se había puesto incluso a coser botones en chalecos para unos grandes almacenes. «Lo que hay que coser por cinco francos, ¡es que parece increíble!»

Y para ir a entregar el currelo, siempre tenía líos en el autobús; una tarde hasta le habían pegado. Una extranjera había sido, la primera extranjera, la única, a la que había hablado en su vida, para insultarla.

Las paredes del hotelito se conservaban aún bien secas en tiempos, cuando el aire circulaba alrededor, pero, ahora que las altas casas de alquiler la rodeaban, todo chorreaba humedad, hasta las cortinas, que se manchaban de moho.

Comprada la casa, la señora Henrouille se había mostrado, durante todo el mes siguiente, risueña, perfecta, encantada, como una religiosa después de la comunión. Había sido ella incluso quien había propuesto a Henrouille: «Mira, Jules, a partir de hoy vamos a comprarnos el periódico todos los días, podemos permitírnoslo…» Así mismo. Acababa de pensar en él, de mirar a su marido, y después había mirado a su alrededor y, al final, había pensado en su madre, la suegra Henrouille. Se había vuelto a poner seria, al instante, la hija, como antes de que hubieran acabado de pagar. Y así fue como volvió todo a empezar, con aquel pensamiento, porque aún había que hacer economías en relación con la madre de su marido, la vieja esa, de la que no hablaba a menudo el matrimonio, ni a nadie de fuera.

En el fondo del jardín estaba, en el cercado en que se acumulaban las escobas viejas, las jaulas viejas de gallinas y todas las sombras de los edificios de alrededor. Vivía en una planta baja de la que casi nunca salía. Y, por cierto, que sólo para pasarle la comida era el cuento de nunca acabar. No quería dejar entrar a nadie en su reducto, ni siquiera a su hijo. Tenía miedo de que la asesinaran, según decía.

Cuando se le ocurrió la idea, a la nuera, de emprender nuevas economías, habló primero con su marido, para tantearlo, para ver si no podrían ingresar, por ejemplo, a la vieja donde las hermanitas de San Vicente, religiosas que precisamente se ocupaban de esas viejas chochas en su asilo. Él no respondió ni que sí ni que no. Era otra cosa lo que lo tenía ocupado en aquel momento, los zumbidos en el oído, que no cesaban. A fuerza de pensarlo, de escucharlos, aquellos ruidos, se había dicho que le impedirían dormir, aquellos ruidos

abominables. Y los escuchaba, en efecto, en lugar de dormir, silbidos, tambores, runruns… Era un nuevo suplicio. No podía quitárselo de la cabeza ni de día ni de noche. Llevaba todos los ruidos dentro.

Poco a poco, de todos modos, al cabo de unos meses así, la angustia se fue consumiendo y ya no le quedaba bastante para ocuparse sólo de ella. Conque volvió al mercado de Saint-Ouen con su mujer. Era, según decían, el más económico de los alrededores, el mercado de Saint-Ouen. Salían por la mañana para todo el día, por los cálculos y comentarios que iban a tener que cambiar sobre los precios de las cosas y las economías que acaso habrían podido hacer con esto en lugar de con lo otro… Hacia las once de la noche, en casa, volvía a darles el miedo a ser asesinados. Era un miedo regular. El menos que su mujer. Él, sobre todo, los ruidos de los oídos, a los que, hacia esa hora, cuando la calle estaba del todo silenciosa, volvía a aferrarse desesperado. «¡Con esto no voy a poder dormir! – se repetía en voz alta para angustiarse mucho más-. ¡No te puedes hacer idea!»

Pero ella nunca había intentado entender lo que quería decir ni imaginar lo que lo atormentaba con sus problemas de oídos. «Pero, ¿me oyes bien?», iba y le preguntaba.

«Sí», le respondía él.

«Pues entonces, ¡no hay problema!… Más valdría que pensaras en lo de tu madre, que nos cuesta tan cara, y, además, que la vida sube todos los días… ¡Y es que su vivienda se ha vuelto una leonera!…»

La asistenta iba a su casa tres horas por semana para lavar, era la única visita que habían recibido durante muchos años. Ayudaba también a la señora Henrouille a hacer su cama y, para que la asistenta tuviera muchos deseos de repetirlo por el barrio, cada vez que daban la vuelta al colchón juntas desde hacía diez años, la señora Henrouille anunciaba con la voz más alta posible: «¡En esta casa nunca hay dinero!» Como indicación y precaución, así, para desanimar a los posibles ladrones y asesinos.

Antes de subir a su alcoba, juntos, cerraban con mucho cuidado todas las salidas, sin quitarse ojo mutuamente. Y después iban a echar una mirada hasta la vivienda de la suegra, al fondo del jardín, para ver si su lámpara seguía encendida. Era la señal de que aún vivía. ¡Gastaba una de petróleo! Nunca apagaba la lámpara. Tenía miedo de los asesinos, también ella, y de sus hijos al mismo tiempo. Desde que vivía allí, hacía veinte años, nunca había abierto las ventanas, ni en invierno ni en verano, y tampoco había apagado nunca la lámpara.

Su hijo le guardaba el dinero, a la madre, pequeñas rentas. El se encargaba. Le dejaban la comida delante de la puerta. Guardaban su dinero. Como Dios manda. Pero ella se quejaba de esas diversas disposiciones y no sólo de ellas, de todo se quejaba. A través de la puerta, ponía de vuelta y media a todos los que se acercaban a su cuarto. «No es culpa mía que se haga usted vieja, abuela -intentaba parlamentar la nuera-. Tiene usted dolores como todas las personas ancianas…»

«¡Anciana lo serás tú! ¡Cacho sinvergüenza! ¡So guarra! ¡Vosotros sois los que me haréis cascar con vuestros asquerosos embustes!…»

Negaba la edad con furor, la vieja Henrouille… Y se debatía, irreconciliable, a través de su puerta, contra los azotes del mundo entero. Rechazaba como asquerosa impostura el contacto, las fatalidades y las resignaciones de la vida exterior. No quería ni oír hablar de todo aquello. «¡Son engaños! – gritaba-. ¡Y vosotros mismos los habéis inventado!»

De todo lo que sucedía fuera de su casucha se defendía atrozmente y de todas las tentaciones de acercamiento y conciliación también. Tenía la certeza de que, si abría la puerta, las fuerzas hostiles acudirían en tropel hasta dentro de su casa, se apoderarían de ella y sería el fin una vez por todas.

«Ahora son astutos -gritaba-. Tienen ojos por toda la cabeza y bocas hasta el ojo del culo y más y sólo para mentir… Así son…»

No tenía pelos en la lengua, así había aprendido a hablar en París, en el mercado de Temple, donde había sido chamarilera como su madre, de muy joven… Era de una época en que la gente humilde aún no había aprendido a escucharse envejecer.

«¡Si no quieres darme dinero, me pongo a trabajar! – gritaba a su nuera-. ¿Oyes, bribona? ¡Me pongo a trabajar!»

«Pero, ¡si ya no puede usted trabajar, abuela!»

«Conque no puedo, ¿eh? ¡Intenta entrar aquí y verás! ¡Te voy a enseñar si puedo o no puedo!»

Y volvían a dejarla protegida en su reducto. De todos modos, querían enseñármela a toda costa, a la vieja, para eso me habían llamado, y para que nos recibiera, ¡menudas artimañas hubo que utilizar! Pero, en fin, yo no acababa de entender del todo para qué me querían. La portera, la tía de Bébert, había sido quien les había dicho y repetido que yo era un médico muy agradable, muy amable, muy complaciente… Querían saber si podía conseguir mantenerla tranquila, a su vieja, sólo con medicamentos… Pero lo que deseaban aún más, en el fondo (y, sobre todo, la nuera), era que la mandase internar de una vez por todas, a la vieja… Después de llamar a la puerta durante una buena media hora, abrió, por fin y de repente, y me la encontré ahí, delante, con los ojos ribeteados de serosidades rosadas. Pero su mirada bailaba, muy vivaracha, de todos modos, por encima de sus mejillas fláccidas y grises, una mirada que te atraía la atención y te hacía olvidar todo el resto, por el placer que te hacía sentir, a tu pesar, y que intentabas retener después por instinto, la juventud.

Aquella mirada alegre animaba todo a su alrededor, en la sombra, con un júbilo juvenil, con una animación mínima, pero pura, de la que ahora carecemos; su cascada voz, cuando vociferaba, repetía, alegre, las palabras, cuando se dignaba hablar como todo el mundo y te las hacía brincar entonces, frases y oraciones,

caracolear y todo y rebotar vivas con mucha gracia, como sabía la gente hacer con la voz y las cosas de su entorno en los tiempos en que no darse maña para contar y cantar, una cosa tras otra, con habilidad, era vergonzoso, propio de bobos y enfermos.

La edad la había cubierto, como a un árbol viejo y tembloroso, de ramas alegres.

Era alegre, la vieja Henrouille, cascarrabias, cochambrosa, pero alegre. La indigencia en que vivía desde hacía más de veinte años no había dejado marca en su alma. Al contrario, se había encogido para defenderse del exterior, como si el frío, todo lo horrible y la muerte sólo debieran venir de él, no de dentro. De dentro nada parecía temer, parecía absolutamente segura de su cabeza, como de algo innegable y comprendido, de una vez por todas.

Y yo que corría tanto tras la mía y en torno del mundo, además.

«Loca» la llamaban, a la vieja; es muy fácil de decir, eso de «loca». No había salido de aquel reducto más de tres veces en doce años, ¡y se acabó! Tal vez tuviera sus razones… No quería perder nada… No iba a decírnoslas a nosotros, que habíamos perdido la inspiración de la vida.

La nuera volvía a su proyecto de internamiento. «¿No le parece, doctor, que está loca?… ¡Ya no hay modo de hacerla salir!… Sin embargo, ¡le sentaría bien de vez en cuando!… ¡pues claro, abuela, que le sentaría bien!… No diga que no… ¡Le sentaría bien!… Se lo aseguro.» La vieja sacudía la cabeza, cerrada, tozuda, salvaje, cuando la invitaban así…

«No quiere que se ocupen de ella… Prefiere andar ahí, arrinconada… Hace frío en su cuarto y no hay fuego… No puede ser, vamos, que siga así… ¿Verdad, doctor, que no puede ser?…»

Yo hacía como que no entendía. Henrouille, por su parte, se había quedado junto a la estufa, prefería no saber exactamente lo que andábamos tramando, su mujer, su madre y yo.,.

La vieja volvió a encolerizarse.

«Entonces, ¡devolvedme todo lo que me pertenece y me iré de aquí!… ¡Yo tengo para vivir!… ¡Y es que no volveréis a oír hablar de mí!… ¡De una vez por todas!…»

«¿Para vivir? Pero, bueno, abuela, ¡si con sus tres mil francos al año no puede vivir!… ¡La vida ha subido desde la última vez que salió usted!… ¿Verdad, doctor, que sería mucho mejor que fuera al asilo de las hermanitas, como le decimos?… ¿Que la atenderán bien, las hermanitas?… Son muy buenas, las hermanitas…»

«¿Al asilo?… ¿Al asilo?… -se rebeló al instante-. ¡No he estado nunca en el asilo!… ¿Y por qué no a casa del cura, ya que estamos?… ¿Eh? Si no tengo bastante dinero, como decís, pues, ¡me pondré a trabajar!…»

«¿A trabajar? Pero, ¡abuela! ¿Dónde? ¡Ay, doctor! Mire usted qué idea: ¡trabajar! ¡A su edad! ¡Cuando va a cumplir los ochenta años! ¡Es una locura, doctor! ¿Quién iba a aceptarla? Pero, abuela, ¡usted está loca!…»

«¡Loca! ¡Ni hablar! ¡En ningún sitio!… Pero tú sí que sí, ¡en algún lado!… ¡Cacho canalla!…»

«¡Escúchela, doctor, cómo delira y me insulta ahora! ¿Cómo quiere usted que sigamos teniéndola aquí?»

La vieja se volvió entonces, me plantó cara a mí, su nuevo peligro.

«¿Qué sabe ése si yo estoy loca? ¿Acaso está dentro de mi cabeza? ¿O de la vuestra? ¡Tendría que estarlo para saberlo!… Conque, ¡largaos los dos!… ¡Marchaos de mi casa!… ¡Sois peores que el invierno de seis meses para amargarme!… Más vale que vaya a ver a mi hijo, ¡en lugar de andar de cháchara por aquí! ¡Necesita mucho más que yo un médico, ése! ¡Que ya ni le quedan dientes! ¡Y eso que los tenía bien bonitos, cuando yo me ocupaba de él!… Hale, venga, ¡largo de aquí los dos!» Y nos dio con la puerta en las narices.

Seguía espiándonos aún con su lámpara, cuando nos alejábamos por el patio. Cuando lo hubimos atravesado, cuando ya estuvimos bastante lejos, volvió a echarse a reír. Se había defendido bien.

Al regreso de aquella excursión enojosa, Henrouille seguía junto a la estufa y dándonos la espalda. Sin embargo, su mujer no cesaba de acribillarme a preguntas y siempre en el mismo sentido… Tenía cara muy morena y taimada, la nuera. No separaba apenas los codos del cuerpo, cuando hablaba. No gesticulaba nada. De todos modos, estaba empeñada en que aquella visita del médico no fuera inútil, pudiese servir para algo… El coste de la vida aumentaba sin cesar… La pensión de la suegra no bastaba… Al fin y al cabo, también ellos envejecían… No podían seguir viviendo como antes, siempre con el miedo a que la vieja muriera desatendida… Provocara un incendio, por ejemplo… Entre sus pulgas y su suciedad… En lugar de ir a un asilo decente, donde se ocuparían muy bien de ella…

Como yo aparenté ser de su opinión, se volvieron aún más amables los dos… prometieron elogiarme mucho por el barrio. Si aceptaba ayudarlos… Compadecerme de ellos… Librarlos de la vieja… Tan desgraciada también ella, en las condiciones en que se empeñaba en vivir…

«Y, además, es que podríamos alquilar su vivienda», sugirió el marido, despertando de repente… Había metido la pata bien, al hablar de eso delante de mí. Su mujer le dio un pisotón por debajo de la mesa. Él no entendía por qué.

Mientras se peleaban, yo me imaginaba el billete de mil francos que podría ganarme sólo con extender el certificado de internamiento. Parecían desearlo con ganas… Seguramente la tía de Bébert les había informado en confianza sobre mí y les había contado que en todo Rancy no había un médico tan boqueras como yo… Que conseguirían de mí lo que quisiesen… ¡No iban a ofrecer a Frolichon semejante papeleta! ¡Era un virtuoso, ése!

Estaba absorto en esas reflexiones, cuando la vieja irrumpió en la habitación donde conspirábamos. Parecía que se lo oliera. ¡Qué sorpresa! Se había remangado las harapientas faldas contra el vientre y ahí estaba poniéndonos verdes de repente y a mí en particular. Había venido sólo para eso desde el fondo del patio.

«¡Granuja! – me decía a mí directamente-. ¡Ya te puedes largar! ¡Fuera de aquí, te digo! ¡No vale la pena que te quedes!… ¡No voy a ir al manicomio!… Y a donde las monjas tampoco, ¡para que te enteres!… ¡De nada te va a servir hablar y mentir!… ¡No vas a poder conmigo, vendido!… ¡Irán ellos antes que yo, esos cabrones, que abusan de una vieja!… Y tú también, canalla, irás a la cárcel. ¡Te lo digo yo! ¡Y dentro de poco, además!»

Estaba visto, no tenía potra yo. ¡Para una vez que se podían ganar mil francos de golpe! Me fui con viento fresco.

En la calle se asomaba aún por encima del pequeño peristilo para insultarme de lejos, en plena negrura, en la que yo me había refugiado: «¡Canalla!… ¡Canalla!», gritaba. Resonaba bien. ¡Qué lluvia! Corrí de un farol a otro hasta el urinario de la Place des Fetes. Primer refugio.

En el edículo, a la altura de las piernas, me encontré a Bébert precisamente. Había entrado para protegerse también él. Me había visto correr, al salir de la casa de los Henrouille. «¿Viene usted de su casa? – me preguntó-. Ahora tendrá usted que subir al quinto de nuestra casa, a ver a la hija…» A aquella clienta, de la que me hablaba, la conocía yo bien, la de las caderas anchas… La de los hermosos muslos largos y suaves… Había un no sé qué de ternura, voluntad y gracia en sus movimientos, propio de las mujeres sexualmente equilibradas. Había venido a consultarme varias veces por el dolor de vientre que no se le iba. A los veinticinco años, con tres abortos a las espaldas, sufría de complicaciones y su familia lo llamaba anemia.

Había que ver lo sólida y bien hecha que estaba, con un gusto por los coitos como pocas mujeres tienen. Discreta en la vida, de modales y expresión razonables. Nada histérica. Pero bien dotada, bien alimentada, bien equilibrada, auténtica campeona de su clase, así mismo. Una hermosa atleta para el placer. Nada había malo en eso. Sólo a hombres casados frecuentaba. Y sólo entendidos, hombres que sabían reconocer y apreciar los hermosos logros naturales y que no consideraban buen asunto a una viciosilla cualquiera. No, su piel trigueña, su sonrisa amable, sus andares y la amplitud noblemente móvil de sus caderas le valían entusiasmos profundos, merecidos, por parte de ciertos jefes de oficina que sabían lo que querían.

Sólo, que, claro está, no podían, de todos modos, divorciarse por eso, los jefes de negociado. Al contrario, era una razón para seguir felices en su matrimonio. Conque, todas las veces, al tercer mes de estar encinta, iba, sin falta, a buscar a la comadrona. Cuando se tiene temperamento pero no un cornudo a mano, no todos los días hay diversión.

Su madre me entreabrió la puerta con precauciones de asesinato. Susurraba, la madre, pero tan fuerte, con tal intensidad, que era peor que las imprecaciones.

«¿Qué he podido hacer al cielo, doctor, para tener una hija así? Ah, por lo menos, ¡no diga nada en el barrio, doctor!… ¡Confío en usted!» No cesaba de agitar su espanto ni de correrse de gusto con lo que podrían pensar sobre el caso los vecinos y las vecinas. En trance de tontería inquieta estaba. Duran mucho esos

estados.

Me iba dejando acostumbrarme a la penumbra del pasillo, al olor de los puerros para la sopa, al empapelado de las paredes, a los ramajes absurdos de éstas, a su voz de estrangulada. Por fin, de farfulleos en exclamaciones, llegamos junto a la cama de la hija, postrada, la enferma, a la deriva. Quise examinarla, pero perdía tanta sangre, era tal papilla, que no se le podía ver ni un centímetro de vagina. Cuajarones. Hacía «gluglú» entre sus piernas como en el cuello cortado del coronel en la guerra. Me limité a colocarle de nuevo el algodón y a arroparla.

La madre no miraba nada, sólo se oía a sí misma. «¡Me voy a morir, doctor! – clamaba-. ¡Me voy a morir de vergüenza!» No intenté disuadirla en absoluto. No sabía qué hacer. En el pequeño comedor contiguo, veíamos al padre, que se paseaba de un extremo a otro. Él no debía de tener preparada aún su actitud para el caso. Tal vez esperara a que los acontecimientos se concretasen antes de elegir una actitud. Se encontraba en una especie de limbo. Las personas van de una comedia a otra. Mientras no esté montada la obra y no distingan aún sus contornos, su papel propicio, permanecen ahí, con los brazos caídos, ante el acontecimiento, y los instintos replegados como un paraguas, bamboleándose de incoherencia, reducidos a sí mismos, es decir, a nada. Cabrones sin ánimos.

Pero la madre, ésa sí, lo desempeñaba, el papel principal, entre la hija y yo. El teatro podía desplomarse, le importaba tres cojones, se encontraba a gusto en él, buena y bella.

Yo sólo podía contar con mis propias fuerzas para deshacer la mierda del hechizo.

Aventuré el consejo de que la trasladaran de inmediato a un hospital para que la operasen rápido.

¡Ah, desgraciado de mí! Con ello le proporcioné su más hermosa réplica, la que estaba esperando.

«¡Qué vergüenza! ¡El hospital! ¡Qué vergüenza, doctor! ¡A nosotros! ¡Ya sólo nos faltaba esto! ¡El colmo!»

Yo no tenía nada más que decir. Me senté, pues, y escuché a la madre debatirse aún más tumultuosa, liada en los camelos trágicos. Demasiada humillación, demasiado apuro conducen a la inercia definitiva. El mundo es demasiado pesado para uno. Abandonas. Mientras invocaba, provocaba al Cielo y al Infierno, atronaba con su desgracia, yo bajaba la nariz y, al hacerlo, destrozado, veía formarse bajo la cama de la hija un charquito de sangre; un reguerito chorreaba despacio de ella a lo largo de la pared y hacia la puerta. Una gota, desde el somier, caía con regularidad. ¡Plaf! ¡Plaf! Las toallas entre las piernas rebosaban de rojo. Pregunté, de todos modos, con voz tímida si ya había expulsado toda la placenta. Las manos de la muchacha, pálidas y azuladas en los extremos, colgaban a cada lado de la cama, sin fuerza. Ante mi pregunta, fue la madre de nuevo la que respondió con un torrente de jeremiadas repulsivas. Pero reaccionar era, después de todo, demasiado para mí.

Estaba tan obsesionado, yo mismo, desde hacía tanto, por la mala suerte, dormía tan mal, que ya no tenía el menor interés, en aquella deriva, por que sucediera esto en lugar de lo otro. Me limitaba a pensar que para escuchar a aquella madre vociferante se estaba mejor sentado que de pie. Cualquier cosa basta, cuando has llegado a estar del todo resignado, para darte placer. Y, además, ¡qué fuerza no me habría hecho falta para interrumpir a aquella salvaje en el preciso momento en que no sabía «cómo salvar el honor de la familia»! ¡Qué papelón! Y, además, ¡es que seguía gritándolo! Tras cada aborto, yo lo sabía por experiencia, se explayaba del mismo modo, entrenada, claro está, para hacerlo cada vez mejor. ¡Iba a durar lo que ella quisiera! Aquella vez me parecía dispuesta a decuplicar sus efectos.

Ella también, pensaba yo, debía de haber sido una criatura hermosa, la madre, bien pulposa en su tiempo, pero más verbal, de todos modos, derrochadora de energía, más demostrativa que la hija, cuya concentrada intimidad había sido un auténtico y admirable logro de la naturaleza. Esas cosas no se han estudiado aún maravillosamente, como merecen. La madre adivinaba esa superioridad animal de la hija sobre ella y, celosa, reprobaba todo por instinto, su forma de dejarse cepillar hasta profundidades inolvidables y de gozar como un continente.

El aspecto teatral del desastre la entusiasmaba, en cualquier caso. Acaparaba con sus dolorosos trémolos el reducido mundillo en que estábamos enfangados por su culpa. Tampoco podíamos pensar en alejarla. Sin embargo, yo debería haberlo intentado. Haber hecho algo… Era mi deber, como se suele decir. Pero me encontraba demasiado bien sentado y demasiado mal de pie.

Su casa era un poco más alegre que la de los Henrouilie, igual de fea, pero más confortable. Había buena temperatura. No era siniestro, como allá abajo, sólo feo, tranquilamente.

Atontado de fatiga, mis miradas vagaban por las cosas de la habitación. Cosillas sin valor que había poseído desde siempre la familia, sobre todo el tapete de la chimenea con borlas de terciopelo rosa, de las que ya no se encuentran en los almacenes, y ese napolitano de porcelana y el costurero con espejo biselado, cuya réplica debía de tener una tía de provincias. No avisé a la madre sobre el charco de sangre que veía formarse bajo la cama ni sobre las gotas que seguían cayendo puntuales, habría gritado aún más fuerte sin por ello escucharme. No iba a acabar nunca de quejarse e indignarse. Tenía vocación.

Más valía callarse y mirar afuera, por la ventana, los terciopelos grises de la tarde que se apoderaban ya de la avenida de enfrente, casa por casa, primero las más pequeñas y luego las demás, las grandes, y después la gente que se agitaba entre ellas, cada vez más débiles, equívocos y desdibujados, vacilando de una acera a otra antes de ir a hundirse en la obscuridad.

Más lejos, mucho más lejos que las fortificaciones, filas e hileras de lucecitas dispersas por toda la sombra como clavos, para tender el olvido sobre la ciudad, y otras lucecitas más que centelleaban entre ellas, verdes, pestañeaban, rojas, venga barcos y más barcos, toda una escuadra venida allí de todas partes para esperar,

trémula, a que se abriesen tras la Torre las enormes puertas de la Noche.

Si aquella madre se hubiera tomado un respiro, hubiese guardado silencio un momento, habríamos podido por lo menos abandonarnos, renunciar a todo, intentar olvidar que había que vivir. Pero me acosaba.

«¿Y si le diera una lavativa, doctor? ¿Qué le parece?» No respondí ni que sí ni que no, pero aconsejé una vez más, ya que tenía la palabra, que la enviaran de inmediato al hospital. Otros aullidos, aún más agudos, más decididos, más estridentes, como respuesta. Era inútil.

Me dirigí despacio hacia la puerta, a la chita callando.

Ahora la sombra nos separaba de la cama.

Ya casi no distinguía las manos de la muchacha, colocadas sobre las sábanas, a causa de su palidez semejante.

Volví a tomarle el pulso, más débil, más furtivo que antes. Su respiración era entrecortada. Seguía oyendo perfectamente, yo, la sangre que caía sobre el entarimado, como el tenue tictac de un reloj cada vez más lento. Era inútil. La madre me precedió hacia la puerta.

«Sobre todo -me recomendó, transida-, doctor, ¡prométame que no dirá nada a nadie! – suplicó-. ¿Me lo jura?»

Yo prometía todo lo que quisieran. Tendí la mano. Fueron veinte francos. Volvió a cerrar la puerta tras mí, poco a poco.

Abajo, la tía de Bébert me esperaba con su cara de circunstancias. «¿Cómo va? ¿Mal?», preguntó. Comprendí que llevaba media hora ya, esperando allí, abajo, para recibir su comisión habitual: dos francos. No me fuera yo a escapar. «Y en casa de los Henrouille, ¿qué tal ha ido?», quiso saber. Esperaba recibir una propina por aquéllos también. «No me han pagado», respondí. Además, era cierto. La sonrisa preparada de la tía se volvió una mueca de desagrado. Desconfiaba de mí.

«¡Mira que es desgracia, doctor, no saber cobrar! ¿Cómo quiere que le respete la gente?… ¡Hoy se paga al contado o nunca!» También eso era cierto. Me largué. Había puesto las judías a cocer antes de salir. Era el momento, caída la noche, de ir a comprar la leche. Durante el día, la gente sonreía al cruzarse conmigo con la botella en la mano. Lógico. No tenía criada.

Y después el invierno se alargó, se extendió durante meses y semanas aún. Ya no salíamos de la bruma y la lluvia en que estábamos inmersos.

Enfermos no faltaban, pero no había muchos que pudieran o quisiesen pagar. La medicina es un oficio ingrato. Cuando los ricos te honran, pareces un criado; con los pobres, un ladrón. ¿«Honorarios»? ¡Bonita palabra! Ya no tienen bastante para jalar ni para ir al cine, ¿y aún vas a cogerles pasta para hacer unos «honorarios»? Sobre todo en el preciso momento en que la cascan. No es fácil. Lo dejas pasar. Te vuelves bueno. Y te arruinas.

Para pagar el mes de enero vendí primero mi aparador, para hacer sitio, expliqué en el barrio, y transformar mi comedor en estudio de cultura física. ¿Quién me creyó? En el mes de febrero, para liquidar las contribuciones, me pulí también la bicicleta y el gramófono, que me había dado Molly al marcharme. Tocaba *No More Worries!* Aún recuerdo incluso la tonada. Es lo único que me queda. Mis discos Bézin los tuvo mucho tiempo en su tienda y por fin los vendió.

Para parecer aún más rico conté entonces que iba a comprarme una moto, en cuanto empezara el buen tiempo, y que por eso me estaba procurando un poco de dinero contante. Lo que me faltaba, en el fondo, era cara dura para ejercer la medicina en serio. Cuando me acompañaban hasta la puerta, después de haber dado a la familia los consejos y entregado la receta, me ponía a hacer toda clase de comentarios sólo para eludir unos minutos más el instante del pago. No sabía hacer de puta. Tenían aspecto tan miserable, tan apestoso, la mayoría de mis clientes, tan torvo también, que siempre me preguntaba de dónde iban a sacar los veinte francos que habían de darme y si no irían a matarme, para desquitarse. Me hacían, de todos modos, mucha falta, a mí, los veinte francos. ¡Qué vergüenza! Podría no haber acabado nunca de enrojecer.

«¡Honorarios!…» Así seguían llamándolos, los colegas. ¡Tan campantes! Como si la palabra fuese algo bien entendido y que ya no hiciera falta explicar… ¡Qué vergüenza!, no podía dejar de decirme y no había salida. Todo se explica, lo sé bien. Pero, ¡no por ello deja de ser para siempre un desgraciado de aúpa el que ha recibido los cinco francos del pobre y del mindundi! Desde aquella época estoy seguro incluso de ser tan desgraciado como cualquiera. No es que hiciese orgías y locuras con sus cinco francos y sus diez francos.,¡No! Pues el casero se me llevaba la mayor parte, pero, aun así, tampoco eso es excusa. Nos gustaría que fuera una excusa, pero aún no lo es. El casero es peor que la mierda. Y se acabó.

A fuerza de quemarme la sangre y de pasar entre los aguaceros helados de aquella estación, estaba adquiriendo más bien aspecto de tuberculoso, a mi vez. Fatalmente. Es lo que ocurre cuando hay que renunciar a casi todos los placeres. De vez en cuando, compraba huevos, aquí, allá, pero mi dieta esencial eran, en suma, las legumbres. Tardan mucho en cocer. Pasaba horas en la cocina vigilando su ebullición, después de la consulta, y, como vivía en el primer piso, tenía desde allí una buena vista del patio. Los patios son las mazmorras de las casas de pisos. Tuve la tira de tiempo, para mirarlo, mi patio, y sobre todo para oírlo.

Allí iban a caer, crujir, rebotar los gritos, las llamadas de las veinte casas del perímetro, hasta los desesperados pajaritos de las porteras, que enmohecían piando por la primavera, que no volverían a ver nunca en sus jaulas, junto a los retretes, todos agrupados, los retretes, allí, en el fondo de sombra, con sus puertas

siempre desvencijadas y colgantes. Cien borrachos, hombres y mujeres, poblaban aquellos ladrillos y llenaban el eco con sus pendencias jactanciosas, sus blasfemias inseguras y desaforadas, tras las comidas de los sábados sobre todo. Era el momento intenso en la vida de las familias. Desafíos a berridos tras darle a la priva bien. Papá manejaba la silla, que había que ver, como un hacha, y mamá el tizón como un sable. ¡Ay de los débiles, entonces! El pequeño era quien cobraba. Los guantazos aplastaban contra la pared a todos los que no podían defenderse y responder: niños, perros o gatos. A partir del tercer vaso de vino, el tinto, el peor, el perro era el que empezaba a sufrir, le aplastaban la pata de un gran pisotón. Así aprendería a tener hambre al mismo tiempo que los hombres. Menudo cachondeo, al verlo desaparecer aullando bajo la cama como un destripado. Era la señal. Nada estimula tanto a las mujeres piripis como el dolor de los animales, no siempre se tienen toros a mano. Se reanudaba la discusión en tono vindicativo, imperiosa como un delirio, la esposa era la que dirigía, lanzando al macho una serie de llamadas estridentes a la lucha. Y después venía la refriega, los objetos rotos quedaban hechos añicos. El patio recogía el estrépito, cuyo eco resonaba por la sombra. Los niños chillaban horrorizados. ¡Descubrían todo lo que había dentro de papá y mamá! Con los gritos atraían su ira.

Yo pasaba muchos días esperando que ocurriera lo que de vez en cuando sucedía al final de aquellas escenas domésticas.

En el tercero, delante de mi ventana, ocurría, en la casa de enfrente.

No podía ver yo nada, pero lo oía bien.

Todo tiene su final. No siempre es la muerte, muchas veces es algo distinto y bastante peor, sobre todo para los niños.

Vivían ahí, aquellos inquilinos, justo a la altura del patio en que la sombra empezaba a ceder. Cuando estaban solos el padre y la madre, los días que eso sucedía, se peleaban primero largo rato y después se hacía un largo silencio. Se estaba preparando la cosa. La tomaban con la niña primero, la hacían venir. Ella lo sabía. Se ponía a lloriquear al instante. Sabía lo que le esperaba. Por la voz, debía de tener por lo menos diez años. Después de muchas veces, acabé comprendiendo lo que hacían, aquellos dos.

Primero la ataban, tardaban la tira, en atarla, como para una operación. Eso los excitaba. «¡Vas a ver tú, granuja!», rugía él. «¡La muy cochina!», decía la madre. «¡Te vamos a enseñar, cochina!», iban y gritaban juntos y cosas y más cosas que le reprochaban al mismo tiempo, cosas que debían de imaginar. Debían de atarla a los barrotes de la cama. Mientras tanto, la niña se quejaba como un ratón cogido en la trampa. «Ya puedes llorar, ya, so guarra, que de ésta no te libras. ¡Anda, que de ésta no te libras!», proseguía la madre y después toda una andanada de insultos, como para un caballo. Excitadísima. «¡Cállate, mamá! – respondía la pequeña bajito-. ¡Cállate, mamá! ¡Pégame, pero cállate, mamá!» No se libraba, desde luego, y menuda tunda recibía. Yo escuchaba hasta el final para estar bien seguro de que no me equivocaba, de que era eso sin duda lo que sucedía. No habría podido comer mis judías, mientras ocurría. Tampoco podía cerrar la ventana. No era capaz de nada. No podía hacer nada. Me limitaba a seguir escuchando como siempre, en todas partes. Sin embargo, creo que me venían fuerzas, al escuchar cosas así, fuerzas para seguir adelante, unas fuerzas extrañas, y entonces, la próxima vez, podría caer aún más bajo, la próxima vez, escuchar otras quejas que aún no había oído o que antes me costaba comprender, porque parece que siempre hay más quejas aún, que todavía no hemos oído ni comprendido.

Cuando le habían pegado tanto, que ya no podía lanzar más alaridos, su hija, gritaba un poco aún, de todos modos, cada vez que respiraba, un gritito apagado.

Oía entonces al hombre decir en ese momento: «¡Ven tú, tía buena! ¡Rápido! ¡Ven para acá!» Muy feliz.

A la madre hablaba así y después se cerraba tras ellos con un porrazo la puerta contigua. Un día, ella le dijo, lo oí: «¡Ah! Te quiero, Jules, tanto, que me jalaría tu mierda, aunque hicieses chorizos así de grandes…»

Así hacían el amor los dos, me explicó su portera. En la cocina lo hacían, contra el fregadero. Si no, no podían.

Poco a poco me fui enterando de todas aquellas cosas sobre ellos, en la calle. Cuando me los encontraba, a los tres juntos, no tenían nada de particular. Se paseaban, como una familia de verdad. A él, el padre, lo veía también, cuando pasaba por delante del escaparate de su almacén, en la esquina del Boulevard Poincaré, en la casa de «Zapatos para pies sensibles», donde era primer dependiente.

La mayoría de las veces nuestro patio no ofrecía sino horrores sin relieve, sobre todo en verano, resonaba con amenazas, ecos, golpes, caídas e injurias indistintas. El sol nunca llegaba hasta el fondo. Estaba como pintado de sombras azules, el patio, bien espesas, sobre todo en los ángulos. Los porteros tenían en él sus pequeños retretes, como colmenas. Por la noche, cuando iban a hacer pipí, los porteros tropezaban contra los cubos de la basura, lo que resonaba en el patio como un trueno.

La ropa intentaba secarse tendida de una ventana a otra.

Después de la cena, lo que se oían más que nada eran discusiones sobre las carreras, las noches que no les daba por hacer brutalidades. Pero muchas veces también aquellas polémicas deportivas terminaban bastante mal, a guantazos, y siempre, por lo menos detrás de una de las ventanas, acababan, por un motivo o por otro, dándose de hostias.

En verano todo olía también que apestaba. Ya no había aire en el patio, sólo olores. El que supera, y fácilmente, a todos los demás es el de la coliflor. Una coliflor equivale a diez retretes, aun rebosantes. Eso está claro. Los del segundo rebosaban con frecuencia. La portera del 8, la tía Cé-zanne, acudía entonces con la varilla de desatrancar. Yo la observaba hacer esfuerzos. Así acabamos teniendo conversaciones. «Yo que usted

-me aconsejaba- haría abortos, a la chita callando, a las embarazadas… Pues no hay mujeres en este barrio ni nada de la vida… ¡Si es que parece increíble!… ¡Y estarían encantadas de solicitarle sus servicios!… ¡Se lo digo yo! Siempre será mejor que curarles las varices a los chupatintas… Sobre todo porque eso se paga al contado.»

La tía Cézanne sentía un gran desprecio de aristócrata, que no sé de dónde le vendría, hacia toda la gente que trabajaba…

«Nunca están contentos, los inquilinos, parecen presos, ¡siempre tienen que estar jeringando a todo el mundo!… Que si se les atasca el retrete… Otro día, que si hay un escape de gas… ¡Que si les abren las cartas!… Siempre con tiquismiquis… Siempre jodiendo la marrana, ¡vamos!… Uno ha llegado incluso a escupirme en el sobre del alquiler… ¿Se da usted cuenta?…»

Muchas veces tenía que renunciar incluso, a desatrancar los retretes, la tía Cézanne, de tan difícil que era. «No sé qué será lo que echan ahí, pero, sobre todo, ¡no hay que dejarlo secar!… Ya sé yo lo que es… ¡Siempre te avisan demasiado tarde!… Y, además, ¡lo hacen a propósito!… Donde estaba antes, hubo incluso que fundir un tubo, ¡de lo duro que estaba!… No sé qué jalarán… ¡Es cosa fina!»

No habrá quien me quite de la cabeza que, si volvió a darme, fue sobre todo por culpa de Robinson. Al principio, yo no había hecho demasiado caso de mis trastornos. Iba tirando, así así, de un enfermo a otro, pero me había vuelto más inquieto aún que antes, cada vez más, como en Nueva York, y también empecé otra vez a dormir peor que de costumbre.

Conque volvérmelo a encontrar, a Robinson, había sido un duro golpe y sentía otra vez como una enfermedad.

Con su jeta toda embadurnada de pena, era como si me devolviese a una pesadilla, de la que no conseguía librarme desde hacía ya demasiados años. No daba pie con bola.

Había ido a reaparecer ahí, delante de mí. El cuento de nunca acabar. Seguro que me había buscado por allí. Yo no intentaba ir a verlo de nuevo, desde luego… Seguro que volvería y me obligaría a pensar otra vez en sus asuntos. Por lo demás, todo me hacía volver a pensar ahora en su cochina persona. Hasta la gente que veía por la ventana, que caminaban, como si tal cosa, por la calle, charlaban en los portales, se rozaban unos con otros, me hacían pensar en él. Yo sabía lo que pretendían, lo que ocultaban, como si tal cosa. Matar y matarse, eso querían, no de una vez, claro está, sino poco a poco, como Robinson, con todo lo que encontraban, penas antiguas, nuevas miserias, odios aún sin nombre, cuando no era la guerra, pura y simple, y que todo sucediese aún más rápido que de costumbre.

Ya ni siquiera me atrevía a salir por miedo a encontrármelo.

Tenían que mandarme llamar dos o tres veces seguidas para que me decidiera a responder a los enfermos. Y entonces, la mayoría de las veces, cuando llegaba, ya habían ido a buscar a otro. Era presa del desorden en la cabeza, como en la vida. En aquella Rué Saint-Vincent, adonde sólo había ido una vez, me mandaron llamar los del tercero del número 12. Fueron incluso a buscarme en coche. Lo reconocí en seguida, al abuelo, persona furtiva, gris y encorvada: susurraba, se limpiaba largo rato los pies en mi felpudo. Por su nieto era por quien quería que me apresurara.

Recordaba yo bien a su hija también, otra de vida alegre, marchita ya, pero sólida y silenciosa, que había vuelto para abortar, en varias ocasiones, a casa de sus padres. No le reprochaban nada, a ésa. Sólo habrían deseado que acabara casándose, a fin de cuentas, sobre todo porque tenía ya un niño de dos años, que vivía con los abuelos.

Estaba enfermo, ese niño, cada dos por tres, y, cuando estaba enfermo, el abuelo, la abuela, la madre lloraban juntos, de lo lindo, y sobre todo porque no tenía padre legítimo. En esos momentos se sienten más afectadas, las familias, por las situaciones irregulares. Creían, los abuelos, sin reconocerlo del todo, que los hijos naturales son más frágiles y se ponen enfermos con mayor frecuencia que los otros.

En fin, el padre, el que creían que lo era, se había marchado y para siempre. Le habían hablado tanto de matrimonio, a aquel hombre, que había acabado cansándose. Debía de estar lejos ahora, si aún corría. Nadie había comprendido aquel abandono, sobre todo la propia hija, porque había disfrutado lo suyo jodiendo con ella.

Conque, desde que se había marchado, el veleidoso, contemplaban los tres al niño y lloriqueaban y así. Ella se había entregado a aquel hombre, como ella decía, «en cuerpo y alma». Tenía que ocurrir y, según ella, eso explicaba todo. El pequeño había salido de su cuerpo y de una vez y la había dejado toda arrugada por las caderas. El espíritu se contenta con frases; el cuerpo es distinto, ése es más difícil, necesita músculos. Es siempre algo verdadero, un cuerpo; por eso ofrece casi siempre un espectáculo triste y repulsivo. He visto, también es cierto, pocas maternidades llevarse tanta juventud de una vez. Ya no le quedaban, por así decir, sino sentimientos, a aquella madre, y un alma. Nadie quería ya saber nada con ella.

Antes de aquel nacimiento clandestino, la familia vivía en el barrio de las «Filies du Calvaire» y desde hacía muchos años. Si habían venido todos a exiliarse a Rancy, no había sido por gusto, sino para ocultarse, caer en el olvido, desaparecer en grupo.

En cuanto resultó imposible disimular aquel embarazo a los vecinos, se habían decidido a abandonar su barrio de París para evitar todos los comentarios. Mudanza de honor.

En Rancy, la consideración de los vecinos no era indispensable y, además, allí eran unos desconocidos y la municipalidad de aquella zona practicaba precisamente una política abominable, anarquista, en una palabra,

de la que se hablaba en toda Francia, una política de golfos. En aquel medio de réprobos, el juicio de los demás no podía contar.

La familia se había castigado espontáneamente, había roto toda relación con los parientes y los amigos de antes. Un drama había sido, un drama lo que se dice completo. Ya no tenían nada más que perder. Desclasados. Cuando quiere uno desacreditarse, se mezcla con el pueblo.

No formulaban ningún reproche contra nadie. Sólo intentaban descubrir, por pequeños arranques de rebeldías inválidas, qué podía haber bebido el Destino el día que les había hecho una putada semejante, a ellos.

La hija experimentaba, por vivir en Rancy, un solo consuelo, pero muy importante, el de poder en adelante hablar con libertad a todo el mundo de «sus nuevas responsabilidades». Su amante, al abandonarla, había despertado un deseo profundo de su naturaleza, imbuida de heroísmo y singularidad. En cuanto estuvo segura para el resto de sus días de que no iba a tener nunca una suerte absolutamente idéntica a la mayoría de las mujeres de su clase y de su medio y de que iba a poder recurrir siempre a la novela de su vida destrozada desde sus primeros amores, se conformó, encantada, con la gran desgracia de que era víctima y los estragos de la suerte fueron, en resumen, dramáticamente bienvenidos. Se pavoneaba en el papel de madre soltera.

En su comedor, cuando entramos, su padre y yo, un alumbrado económico apenas permitía distinguir las caras sino como manchas pálidas, carnes repitiendo, machaconas, palabras que se quedaban rondando en la penumbra, cargada con ese olor a pimienta pasada que desprenden todos los muebles de familia.

Sobre la mesa, en el centro, boca arriba, el niño, entre las mantillas, se dejaba palpar. Le apreté, para empezar, el vientre, con mucha precaución, poco a poco, desde el ombligo hasta los testículos, y después lo ausculté, aún con mucha seriedad.

Su corazón latía con el ritmo de un gatito, seco y loco. Y después se hartó, el niño, del manoseo de mis dedos y de mis maniobras y se puso a dar alaridos, como pueden hacerlo los de su edad, inconcebiblemente. Era demasiado. Desde el regreso de Robinson, había empezado a sentirme muy extraño en la cabeza y en el cuerpo y los gritos de aquel nene inocente me causaron una impresión abominable. ¡Qué gritos, Dios mío! ¡Qué gritos! No podía soportarlos un instante más.

Otra idea, seguramente, debió de determinar también mi absurda conducta. Crispado como estaba, no pude por menos de comunicarles en voz alta el rencor y el hastío que experimentaba desde hacía mucho, para mis adentros.

«¡Eh -respondí, al nene aullador-, menos prisas, tontín! ¡Ya tendrás tiempo de sobra de berrear! ¡No te va a faltar, no temas, bobito! ¡No gastes todas las fuerzas! ¡No van a faltar desgracias para consumirte los ojos y la cabeza también y aun el resto, si no te andas con cuidado!»

«¿Qué dice usted, doctor? – se sobresaltó la abuela. Me limité a repetir-: ¡No van a faltar, ni mucho menos!»

«¿Qué? ¿Qué es lo que no falta?», preguntaba, horrorizada…

«¡Intenten comprender! – le respondí-. ¡Intenten comprender! ¡Hay que explicarles demasiadas cosas! ¡Eso es lo malo! ¡Intenten comprender! ¡Hagan un esfuerzo!»

«¿Qué es lo que no falta?… ¿Qué dice?» Y de repente se preguntaban, los tres, y la hija de las «responsabilidades» puso unos ojos muy raros y empezó a lanzar, también ella, unos gritos de aúpa. Acababa de encontrar una ocasión cojonuda para un ataque. No iba a desaprovecharla. ¡Era la guerra! ¡Y venga patalear! ¡Y ahogos! ¡Y estrabismos horrendos! ¡Estaba yo bueno! ¡Había que verlo! «¡Está loco, mamá! – gritaba asfixiándose-. ¡El doctor se ha vuelto loco! ¡Quítale a mi niño, mamá!» Salvaba a su hijo.

Nunca sabré por qué, pero estaba tan excitada, que empezó a hablar con acento vasco. «¡Dice cosas espantosas! ¡Mamá!… ¡Es un demente!…»

Me arrancaron el niño de las manos, como si lo hubieran sacado de las llamas. El abuelo, tan tímido antes, descolgó entonces su enorme termómetro de caoba, como una maza… Y me acompañó a distancia, hacia la puerta, cuyo batiente arrojó contra mí, con violencia, de un patadón.

Por supuesto, aprovecharon para no pagarme la visita…

Cuando volví a verme en la calle, no me sentía demasiado orgulloso de lo que acababa de ocurrirme. No tanto por mi reputación, que no podía ser peor en el barrio que la que ya me habían asignado, y sin que por ello hubiera necesitado yo intervenir, cuanto por Robinson, otra vez, del que había esperado librarme con un arrebato de franqueza, encontrando en el escándalo voluntario la resolución de no volver a recibirlo, haciéndome como una escena brutal a mí mismo.

Así, había yo calculado: ¡Voy a ver, a título experimental, todo el escándalo que puede llegar a hacerse de una sola vez! Sólo, que no se acaba nunca con el escándalo y la emoción, no se sabe nunca hasta dónde habrá que llegar con la franqueza… Lo que los hombres te ocultan aún… Lo que te mostrarán aún… Si vives lo suficiente… Si profundizas bastante en sus mandangas… Había que empezar otra vez desde el principio.

Tenía prisa por ir a ocultarme, yo también, de momento. Me metí, para volver a casa, por el callejón Gibet y después por la Rué des Valentines. Es un buen trecho de camino. Tienes tiempo de cambiar de opinión. Iba hacia las luces. En la Place Transitoire me encontré a Péridon, el farolero. Cambiamos unas palabras anodinas. «¿Va usted al cine, doctor?», me preguntó. Me dio una idea. Me pareció buena.

En autobús se llega antes que en metro. Tras aquel intermedio vergonzoso, con gusto me habría marchado de Rancy de una vez y para siempre, si hubiera podido.

A medida que te quedas en un sitio, las cosas y las personas se van destapando, pudriéndose, y se ponen a apestar a propósito para ti.

De todos modos, hice bien en volver a Rancy, el día siguiente mismo, por Bébert, que cayó enfermo justo entonces. El colega Frolichon acababa de marcharse de vacaciones, la tía dudó y, al final, me pidió, de todos modos, que me ocupara de su sobrino, seguramente porque yo era el menos caro de los médicos que conocía.

Ocurrió después de Semana Santa. Empezaba a hacer bueno. Pasaban sobre Rancy los primeros vientos del sur, los mismos que dejan caer todos los hollines de las fábricas sobre las ventanas.

Duró semanas, la enfermedad de Bébert. Yo iba dos veces al día, a verlo. La gente del barrio me esperaba delante de la portería, como si tal cosa, y en los portales los vecinos también. Era como una distracción para ellos. Acudían de lejos para enterarse de si iba peor o mejor. El sol que pasa a través de demasiadas cosas no deja nunca en la calle sino una luz de otoño con pesares y nubes.

Consejos recibí muchos a propósito de Bébert. Todo el barrio, en realidad, se interesaba por su caso. Hablaban a favor y después en contra de mi inteligencia. Cuando entraba yo en la portería, se hacía un silencio crítico y bastante hostil, de una estupidez abrumadora sobre todo. Estaba siempre llena de comadres amigas, la portería, las íntimas, conque apestaba a enaguas y a orina. Cada cual defendía su médico preferido, siempre más sutil, más sabio. Yo sólo presentaba una ventaja, en suma, pero justo la que difícilmente te perdonan, la de ser casi gratuito; perjudica al enfermo y a su familia, por pobre que ésta sea, un médico gratuito.

Bébert no deliraba aún, simplemente ya no tenía las menores ganas de moverse. Empezó a perder peso todos los días. Un poco de carne amarillenta y fláccida le cubría el cuerpo, temblando de arriba abajo, cada vez que latía su corazón. Parecía que estuviera por todo el cuerpo, su corazón, bajo la piel, de tan delgado que se había quedado, Bébert, en más de un mes de enfermedad. Me dirigía sonrisas de niño bueno, cuando iba a verlo. Superó así, muy amable, los 39º y después los 40º y se quedó ahí durante días y después semanas, pensativo.

La tía de Bébert había acabado callándose y dejándonos tranquilos. Había dicho todo lo que sabía, conque se iba a lloriquear, desconcertada, a los rincones de su portería, uno tras otro. La pena se le había presentado, por fin, al acabársele las palabras, ya no parecía saber qué hacer con la pena, intentaba quitársela sonándose los mocos, pero le volvía, su pena, a la garganta y con ella las lágrimas y volvía a empezar. Se ponía perdida y así llegaba a estar un poco más sucia aún que de costumbre y se asombraba: «¡Dios mío! ¡Dios mío!», decía. Y se acabó. Había llegado al límite de sí misma, a fuerza de llorar, y los brazos se le volvían a caer y se quedaba muy alelada, delante de mí.

Volvía, de todos modos, hacia atrás en su pena y después volvía a decidirse y se ponía a sollozar otra vez. Así, semanas duraron aquellas idas y venidas en su pena. Había que prever un desenlace fatal para aquella enfermedad. Una especie de tifoidea maligna era, contra la cual acababa estrellándose todo lo que yo probaba, los baños, el suero… el régimen seco… las vacunas… Nada daba resultado. De nada servía que me afanara, todo era en vano. Bébert se moría, irresistiblemente arrastrado, sonriente.

Se mantenía en lo alto de su fiebre como en equilibrio y yo abajo no daba pie con bola. Por supuesto, casi todo el mundo, e imperiosamente, aconsejó a la tía que me despidiera sin rodeos y recurriese rápido a otro médico, más experto, más serio.

El incidente de la hija de las «responsabilidades» se había sabido en todas partes y se había comentado de lo lindo. Se relamían con él en el barrio.

Pero, como los demás médicos avisados sobre la naturaleza del caso de Bébert se escabulleron, al final seguí yo. Puesto que a mí me había tocado, el caso de Bébert, debía continuar yo, pensaban, con toda lógica, los colegas.

Ya no me quedaba otro recurso que ir hasta la tasca a telefonear de vez en cuando a otros facultativos, aquí y allá, que conocía más o menos bien, lejos, en París, en los hospitales, para preguntarles lo que harían ellos, los listos y considerados, ante una tifoidea como la que me traía de cabeza. Me daban buenos consejos, todos, en respuesta, buenos consejos inoperantes, pero, aun así, me daba gusto oírlos esforzarse de ese modo, y gratis por fin, por el pequeño desconocido al que yo protegía. Acabas alegrándote con cualquier cosilla de nada, con el poquito consuelo que la vida se digna dejarte.

Mientras yo afinaba así, la tía de Bébert se desplomaba a derecha e izquierda por sillas y escaleras, no salía de su alelamiento sino para comer. Pero nunca, eso sí que no, se saltó una sola comida, todo hay que decirlo. Por lo demás, no le habrían dejado olvidarse. Sus vecinos velaban por ella. La cebaban entre los sollozos. «¡Da fuerzas!», le decían. Y hasta empezó a engordar.

Tocante a olor de coles de Bruselas, en el momento álgido de la enfermedad de Bébert, hubo en la portería auténticas orgías. Era la temporada y le llegaban de todas partes, regaladas, coles de Bruselas, cocidas, humeantes.

«Me dan fuerzas, ¡es verdad!… -reconocía de buena gana-. ¡Y hacen orinar bien!»

Antes de que llegara la noche, por los timbrazos, para tener un sueño más ligero y oír en seguida la primera llamada, se atiborraba de café, así los inquilinos no despertaban a Bébert, llamando dos o tres veces seguidas. Al pasar por delante de la casa, por la noche, entraba yo a ver si por casualidad había acabado aquello. «¿No cree usted que cogió la enfermedad con la manzanilla al ron que se empeñó en beber en la frutería el día de la carrera ciclista?», suponía en voz alta, la tía. Esa idea la traía de cabeza desde el principio.

Idiota.

«¡Manzanilla!», murmuraba débilmente Bébert, como un eco perdido en la fiebre. ¿Para qué disuadirla? Yo realizaba una vez más los dos o tres simulacros profesionales que esperaban de mí y después volvía a reunirme con la noche, nada orgulloso, porque, igual que mi madre, nunca conseguía sentirme del todo inocente de las desgracias que sucedían.

Hacia el decimoséptimo día, me dije, de todos modos, que haría bien en ir a preguntar qué pensaban en el Instituto Bioduret Joseph, de un caso de tifoidea de ese género, y pedirles, al tiempo, un consejo y tal vez una vacuna incluso, que me recomendarían. Así, lo habría hecho todo, lo habría probado todo, hasta las extravagancias, y, si moría Bébert, pues… tal vez no tuvieran nada que reprocharme. Llegué allí al Instituto, en el otro extremo de París, detrás de la Villette, una mañana hacia las once. Primero me hicieron pasearme por laboratorios y más laboratorios en busca de un sabio. Aún no había nadie, en aquellos laboratorios, ni sabios ni público, sólo objetos volcados en gran desorden, pequeños cadáveres de animales destripados, colillas, espitas de gas desportilladas, jaulas y tarros con ratones asfixiándose dentro, retortas, vejigas por allí tiradas, banquetas rotas, libros y polvo, más y más colillas por todos lados, con predominio del olor de éstas y el de urinario. Como había llegado muy temprano, decidí ir a dar una vuelta, ya que estaba, hasta la tumba del gran sabio Bioduret Joseph, que se encontraba en los propios sótanos del Instituto entre oros y mármoles. Fantasía burgueso-bizantina de refinado gusto. La colecta se hacía al salir del panteón, el guardián estaba refunfuñando incluso por una moneda belga que le habían endosado. A ese Bioduret se debe que muchos jóvenes optaran desde hace medio siglo por la carrera científica. Resultaron tantos fracasados como a la salida del Conservatorio. Acabamos todos, por lo demás, pareciéndonos tras algunos años de no haber logrado nada. En las zanjas de la gran derrota, un «laureado de facultad» vale lo mismo que un «Premio de Roma». Lo que pasa es que no cogen el autobús a la misma hora. Y se acabó.

Tuve que esperar bastante tiempo aún en los jardines del Instituto, pequeña combinación de cárcel y plaza pública, jardines, flores colocadas con cuidado a lo largo de aquellas paredes adornadas con mala intención.

De todos modos, algunos jóvenes del personal acabaron llegando los primeros, muchos de ellos traían ya provisiones del mercado cercano, en grandes redecillas y parecían estar boqueras. Y después los sabios cruzaron, a su vez, la verja, más lentos y reticentes que sus modestos subalternos, en grupitos mal afeitados y cuchicheantes. Iban a dispersarse al fondo de los corredores y descascarillando la pintura de las paredes. La entrada de viejos escolares entrecanos, con paraguas, atontados por la rutina meticulosa, las manipulaciones desesperadamente repulsivas, atados por salarios de hambre durante toda su madurez a aquellas cocinillas de microbios, recalentando aquel guiso interminable de legumbres, cobayas asfícticos y otras porquerías inidentificables.

Ya no eran, a fin de cuentas, ellos mismos sino viejos roedores domésticos, monstruosos, con abrigo. La gloria en nuestro tiempo apenas sonríe sino a los ricos, sabios o no. Los plebeyos de la Investigación no podían contar, para seguir manteniéndose vivos, sino con su propio miedo a perder la plaza en aquel cubo de basura caliente, ilustre y compartimentado. Se aferraban esencialmente al título de sabio oficial. Título gracias al cual los farmacéuticos de la ciudad seguían confiándoles los análisis (mezquinamente retribuidos, por cierto) de las orinas y los esputos de la clientela. Raquíticos y azarosos ingresos de sabio.

En cuanto llegaba, el investigador metódico iba a inclinarse ritualmente unos minutos sobre las tripas biliosas y corrompidas del conejo de la semana pasada, el que se exponía de modo permanente, en un rincón del cuarto, benditera de inmundicias. Cuando su olor llegaba a ser irresistible de verdad, sacrificaban otro conejo, pero antes no, por las economías en que el profesor Jaunisset, ilustre secretario del Instituto, se empeñaba en aquella época con mano fanática.

Ciertas podredumbres animales sufrían, por esa razón, por economía, increíbles degradaciones y prolongaciones. Todo es cuestión de costumbre. Algunos ayudantes de laboratorio bien entrenados habrían cocinado perfectamente dentro de un ataúd en actividad, pues ya la putrefacción y sus tufos no les afectaban. Aquellos modestos ayudantes de la gran investigación científica llegaban incluso, en ese sentido, a superar en economía al propio profesor Jaunisset, pese a ser éste de una sordidez proverbial, y lo vencían en su propio juego, al aprovechar el gas de sus estufas, por ejemplo, para prepararse numerosos cocidos personales y muchos otros guisos lentos, más peligrosos aún.

Cuando los sabios habían acabado de realizar el examen distraído de las tripas del cobaya y del conejo ritual, habían llegado despacito al segundo acto de su vida científica cotidiana, el del pitillo. Intento de neutralización de los hedores ambientes y del hastío mediante el humo del tabaco. De colilla en colilla, los sabios acababan, de todos modos, su jornada, hacia las cinco de la tarde. Volvían entonces a poner con mucho cuidado las putrefacciones a templar en la estufa bamboleante. Octave, el ayudante, ocultaba sus judías cociditas en un periódico para mejor pasar con ellas impunemente por delante de la portera. Fintas. Preparadita se llevaba la cena, a Gargan. El sabio, su maestro, añadía unas líneas al libro de experimentos, tímidamente, como una duda, con vistas a una próxima comunicación totalmente ociosa, pero justificativa de su presencia en el Instituto y de las escasas ventajas que entrañaba, incordio que tendría que decidirse, de todos modos, a acometer en breve ante alguna Academia infinitamente imparcial y desinteresada.

El sabio auténtico tarda veinte buenos años, por término medio, en realizar el gran descubrimiento, el que consiste en convencerse de que el delirio de unos no hace, ni mucho menos, la felicidad de los otros y de que a cada cual, aquí abajo, incomodan las manías del vecino.

El delirio científico, más razonado y frío que los otros, es al mismo tiempo el menos tolerable de todos. Pero cuando has conseguido algunas facilidades para subsistir, aunque sea miserablemente, en determinado lugar, con ayuda de ciertos paripés, no te queda más remedio que perseverar o resignarte a cascar como un cobaya. Las costumbres se adquieren más rápido que el valor y sobre todo la de jalar.

Conque iba yo buscando a mi Parapine por el Instituto, ya que había acudido a propósito desde Rancy para verlo. Debía, pues, perseverar en mi búsqueda. No era fácil. Tuve que volver a empezar varias veces, vacilando largo rato entre tantos pasillos y puertas.

No almorzaba, aquel solterón, y sólo cenaba dos o tres veces por semana como máximo, pero entonces con avaricia, con el frenesí de los estudiantes rusos, todas cuyas caprichosas costumbres conservaba.

Tenía fama, aquel Parapine, en su medio especializado, de la más alta competencia. Todo lo relativo a las enfermedades tifoideas le era familiar, tanto las animales como las humanas. Su fama databa de veinte años antes, de la época en que ciertos autores alemanes afirmaron un buen día haber aislado vibriones de Eberth en el exudado vaginal de una niña de dieciocho meses. Se armó un gran alboroto en el dominio de la verdad. Parapine, encantado, respondió sin demora en nombre del Instituto Nacional y superó a la primera a aquel teutón farolero cultivando, por su parte, el mismo germen pero en estado puro y en el esperma de un inválido de setenta y dos años. Se hizo célebre al instante, con lo que ya le bastaba, hasta su muerte, con emborronar regularmente algunas columnas ilegibles en diversas publicaciones especializadas para mantenerse en candelero. Cosa que hizo sin dificultad, por lo demás, desde aquel día de audacia y fortuna.

Ahora el público científico serio le daba crédito y confianza. Eso dispensaba al público serio de leerlo.

Si se pusiera a criticar, dicho público, no habría progreso posible. Se perdería un año con cada página.

Cuando llegué ante la puerta de su celda, Serge Parapine estaba escupiendo a los cuatro ángulos del laboratorio con una saliva incesante y una mueca tan asqueada, que daba que pensar. Se afeitaba de vez en cuando, Parapine, pero, aun así, conservaba en las mejillas bastantes pelos como para tener aspecto de evadido. Tiritaba sin cesar o, al menos, eso parecía, pese a no quitarse nunca el abrigo, bien surtido de manchas y sobre todo de caspa, que dispersaba después con toquecitos de las uñas en derredor, al tiempo que el mechón, siempre oscilante, le caía sobre la nariz, verde y rosa.

Durante mi período de prácticas en la Facultad, Parapine me había dado algunas lecciones de microscopio y pruebas en diversas ocasiones de auténtica benevolencia. Yo esperaba que, desde aquella época tan lejana, no me hubiera olvidado del todo y estuviera en condiciones de darme tal vez un consejo terapéutico de primerísimo orden para el caso de Bébert, que me obsesionaba de verdad.

Estaba claro, salvar a Bébert era mucho más importante para mí que impedir la muerte de un adulto. Nunca acaba de desagradarte del todo que un adulto se vaya, siempre es un cabrón menos sobre la tierra, te dices, mientras que en el caso de un niño no estás, ni mucho menos, tan seguro. Está el futuro por delante.

Enterado Parapine de mis dificultades, se mostró deseoso de ayudarme y orientar mi terapéutica peligrosa, sólo que él había aprendido, en veinte años, tantas y tan diversas cosas, y con demasiada frecuencia tan contradictorias, sobre la tifoidea, que había llegado a serle muy difícil ahora y, como quien dice, imposible formular, en relación con esa afección tan corriente y su tratamiento, la menor opinión concreta o categórica.

«Ante todo, ¿cree usted, querido colega, en los sueros? – empezó preguntándome-. ¿Eh? ¿Qué me dice usted?… Y las vacunas, ¿qué?… En una palabra, ¿cuál es su impresión?… Inteligencias preclaras ya no quieren ni oír hablar en la actualidad de las vacunas… Es audaz, colega, desde luego… También a mí me lo parece… Pero en fin… ¿Eh? ¿De todos modos? ¿No le parece que algo de cierto hay en ese negativismo?… ¿Qué opina usted?»

Las frases salían de su boca a saltos terribles entre avalanchas de erres enormes.

Mientras se debatía, como un león, entre otras hipótesis furiosas y desesperadas, Jaunisset, que aún vivía en aquella época, el grande e ilustre secretario, fue a pasar justo bajo nuestras ventanas, puntual y altanero.

Al verlo, Parapine palideció aún más, de ser posible, y cambió, nervioso, de conversación, impaciente por manifestarme al instante el asco que le provocaba la simple visión cotidiana de aquel Jaunisset, gloria universal, por cierto. Me lo calificó, al famoso Jaunisset, en un instante de falsario, maníaco de la especie más temible, y le atribuyó, además, más crímenes monstruosos, inéditos y secretos que los necesarios para poblar un presidio entero durante un siglo.

Y yo ya no podía impedir que me diera, Parapine, cien mil detalles odiosos sobre el grotesco oficio de investigador, al que se veía obligado a atenerse, para poder jalar, odio más preciso, más científico, la verdad, que los emanados por los otros hombres colocados en condiciones semejantes en oficinas o almacenes.

Emitía aquellas opiniones en voz muy alta y a mí me asombraba su franqueza. Su ayudante de laboratorio nos escuchaba. Había terminado, también él, su cocinilla y se ajetreaba, por cubrir el expediente, entre estufas y probetas, pero estaba tan acostumbrado, el ayudante, a oír a Parapine con sus maldiciones, por así decir, cotidianas, que ahora esas palabras, por exorbitantes que fueran, le parecían absolutamente académicas e insignificantes. Ciertos modestos experimentos personales que llevaba a cabo con mucha seriedad, el ayudante, en una de las estufas del laboratorio, le parecían, contrariamente a lo que contaba Parapine, prodigiosos y deliciosamente instructivos. Los furores de Parapine no conseguían distraerlo. Antes de irse, cerraba la puerta de la estufa sobre sus microbios personales, como sobre un tabernáculo, tierna, escrupulosamente.

«¿Ha visto usted a mi ayudante, colega? ¿Ha visto usted a ese viejo y cretino ayudante? – dijo Parapine,

sobre él, en cuanto hubo salido-. Bueno, pues, pronto hará treinta años que no oye hablar a su alrededor, mientras barre mis basuras, sino de ciencia y de lo lindo y sinceramente, la verdad… y, sin embargo, lejos de estar asqueado, ¡él es ahora el único que ha acabado creyendo en ella aquí mismo! A fuerza de manosear mis cultivos, ¡le parecen maravillosos! Se relame… ¡La más insignificante de mis chorradas lo embriaga! Por lo demás, ¿no ocurre así en todas las religiones? ¿Acaso no hace siglos que el sacerdote piensa en cualquier otra cosa menos en Dios, mientras que su varaplata aún cree en él?… ¿Y a pie juntillas? ¡Es como para vomitar, la verdad!… ¡Pues no llega este bruto hasta el ridículo extremo de copiar al gran Bioduret Joseph en el traje y la perilla! ¿Se ha fijado usted?… A propósito, le diré, en confianza, que el gran Bioduret no difería de mi ayudante sino por su reputación mundial y la intensidad de sus caprichos… Con su manía de aclarar perfectamente las botellas y vigilar desde una proximidad increíble el nacimiento de las polillas, siempre me pareció monstruosamente vulgar, a mí, ese inmenso genio experimental… Quítele al gran Bioduret su prodigiosa mezquindad doméstica y dígame, haga el favor, qué queda de admirable. ¿Qué? Una figura hostil de portero quisquilloso y malévolo. Y se acabó. Además, lo demostró de sobra en la Academia, lo cerdo que era, durante los veinte años que pasó en ella, detestado por casi todo el mundo; tuvo encontronazos con casi todos y la tira de veces… Era un megalómano ingenioso… Y se acabó.»

Parapine se disponía a su vez, con calma, a marcharse. Lo ayudé a pasarse una especie de bufanda en torno al cuello y encima de la caspa de siempre una especie de mantilla también. Entonces se acordó de que yo había ido a verlo a propósito de algo concreto y urgente. «Es verdad -dijo- que estaba aburriéndolo con mis asuntillos y me olvidaba de su enfermo. ¡Perdóneme y volvamos rápido a su tema! Pero, ¿qué decirle, a fin de cuentas, que no sepa usted ya? Entre tantas teorías vacilantes, experiencias indiscutibles, ¡lo racional sería, en el fondo, no elegir! Conque haga lo que pueda, ¡ande, colega! Ya que debe usted hacer algo, ¡haga lo que pueda! Por cierto que a mí, puedo asegurárselo confidencialmente, ¡esa afección tífica ha llegado a asquearme hasta grados indecibles! ¡Inimaginables incluso! Cuando yo la abordé en mi juventud, la tifoidea, tan sólo éramos unos pocos los que investigábamos ese terreno, es decir, que sabíamos exactamente cuántos éramos y podíamos realzarnos mutuamente… Mientras que ahora, ¿qué decirle? ¡Llegan de Laponia, amigo! ¡de Perú! ¡Cada día más! ¡Llegan de todas partes especialistas! ¡Los fabrican en serie en Japón! En el plazo de unos años he visto el mundo inundado con un auténtico diluvio de publicaciones universales y descabelladas sobre ese mismo tema tan machacado. Me resigno, para conservar mi plaza y defenderla, desde luego, bien que mal, a producir y reproducir mi articulito, siempre el mismo, de un congreso a otro, de una revista a otra, al que me limito a aportar, hacia el final de cada temporada, algunas modificaciones sutiles y anodinas, del todo accesorias… Pero, aun así, créame, colega, la tifoidea, en nuestros días, es algo tan trillado como la mandolina o el banjo. ¡Es como para morirse, ya digo! Cada cual quiere tocar una tonadilla a su manera. No, prefiero confesárselo, no me siento con fuerzas para preocuparme más; lo que busco para acabar mi existencia es un rinconcito de investigaciones muy tranquilas, con las que no me granjee ni enemigos ni discípulos, sino esa mediocre notoriedad sin envidias con la que me contento y que tanto necesito. Entre otras paparruchas, se me ha ocurrido el estudio de la influencia comparativa de la calefacción central en las hemorroides de los países septentrionales y meridionales. ¿Qué le parece? ¿Higiene? ¿Régimen? Están de moda, esos cuentos, ¿verdad? Semejante estudio, convenientemente encarrilado y prolongado lo suyo, me valdrá el favor de la Academia, no me cabe duda, que cuenta con una mayoría de vejestorios, a quienes esos problemas de calefacción y hemorroides no pueden dejar indiferentes. ¡Fíjese lo que han hecho por el cáncer, que tan de cerca los afecta!… ¿Que después la Academia me honra con uno de sus premios sobre higiene? ¿Qué sé yo? ¿Diez mil francos? ¿Eh? Pues tendré para pagarme un viaje a Venecia… En mi juventud fui con frecuencia a Venecia, mi joven amigo… ¡Pues sí! Se muere de hambre allí igual que en otros sitios… Pero se respira allí un olor a muerte suntuoso, que no es fácil de olvidar después…»

En la calle, tuvimos que volver, veloces, sobre nuestros pasos para buscar sus chanclos, que había olvidado. Con eso nos retrasamos. Y después nos apresuramos hacia un sitio, no me dijo cuál.

Por la larga Rué de Vaugirard, salpicada de legumbres y estorbos, llegamos a la entrada de una plaza rodeada de castaños y agentes de policía. Nos colamos hasta la sala trasera de un pequeño café, donde Parapine se apostó detrás de un cristal, protegido por un visillo.

«¡Demasiado tarde! – dijo, despechado-. ¡Ya han salido!»

«¿Quiénes?»

«Las alumnitas del instituto… Mire, hay algunas encantadoras… Me conozco sus piernas de memoria. No puedo imaginar nada mejor para acabar el día… ¡Vámonos! Otro día será…»

Y nos separamos muy amigos.

Habría preferido no tener que volver nunca a Rancy. Desde aquella misma mañana que me había marchado de allí, casi había olvidado mis preocupaciones habituales; estaban aún tan incrustadas en Rancy, que no me seguían. Se habrían muerto allí, tal vez, mis preocupaciones, de abandono, como Bébert, si yo no hubiese regresado. Eran preocupaciones de suburbio. Sin embargo, por la Rué Bonaparte, me volvió la reflexión, la triste. Y, sin embargo, es una calle como para dar placer, más bien, al transeúnte. Pocas hay tan acogedoras y agradables. Pero, al acercarme al río, me iba entrando miedo, de todos modos. Empecé a dar vueltas. No conseguía decidirme a cruzar el Sena. ¡Todo el mundo no es César! Al otro lado, en la otra orilla, comenzaban mis penas. Decidí esperar así, a la orilla izquierda, hasta la noche. En último caso, unas horas de sol ganadas, me decía.

El agua venía a chapotear junto a los pescadores y me senté a ver lo que hacían. La verdad es que no tenía ninguna prisa yo tampoco, tan poca como ellos. Me parecía haber llegado al momento, a la edad tal vez, en que sabes perfectamente lo que pierdes cada hora que pasa. Pero aún no has adquirido la sabiduría necesaria para pararte en seco en el camino del tiempo, pero es que, si te detuvieras, no sabrías qué hacer tampoco, sin esa locura por avanzar que te embarga y que admiras durante toda la juventud. Ya te sientes menos orgulloso, de tu juventud, aún no te atreves a reconocerlo en público, que acaso no sea sino eso, tu juventud, el entusiasmo por envejecer.

Descubres en tu ridículo pasado tanta ridiculez, engaño y credulidad, que desearías acaso dejar de ser joven al instante, esperar a que se aparte, la juventud, esperar a que te adelante, verla irse, alejarse, contemplar toda tu vanidad, llevarte la mano a tu vacío, verla pasar de nuevo ante ti, y después marcharte tú, estar seguro de que se ha ido de una vez, tu juventud, y, tranquilo entonces, por tu parte, volver a pasar muy despacio al otro lado del Tiempo para ver, de verdad, cómo son la gente y las cosas.

A la orilla del río, los pescadores no se estrenaban. Ni siquiera parecía importarles demasiado pescar o no. Los peces debían de conocerlos. Se quedaban allí, todos, haciendo como que pescaban. Los últimos rayos de sol, deliciosos, mantenían aún un poco de calorcito a nuestro alrededor y hacían saltar sobre el agua pequeños reflejos entreverados de azul y oro. Viento llegaba muy fresco de enfrente por entre los altos árboles, muy sonriente, el viento, asomándose por entre mil hojas, en ráfagas suaves. Se estaba bien. Dos buenas horas permanecimos así, sin pescar nada, sin hacer nada. Y después el Sena se obscureció y la esquina del puente se puso roja con el crepúsculo. El mundo, al pasar por el muelle, nos había olvidado allí, entre la orilla y el agua.

La noche salió de debajo de los arcos, subió a lo largo del castillo, tomó la fachada, las ventanas, una tras otra, que flameaban ante la sombra. Y después se apagaron también, las ventanas.

Ya sólo quedaba marcharse una vez más.

Los libreros de lance de las orillas del río estaban cerrando sus cajas. «¿Vienes?», fue y gritó la mujer, por encima del pretil a su marido, a mi lado, quien, por su parte, cerraba sus instrumentos y la silla de tijera y los gusanos. Refunfuñó y todos los demás pescadores refunfuñaron tras él y volvimos a subir, yo también, arriba, refunfuñando hacia donde pasaba la gente. Hablé a su mujer, sólo para decirle algo amable, antes de que cayese la noche por todas partes. Al instante, quiso venderme un libro. Era uno que había olvidado meter en la caja, según decía. «Conque se lo daría más barato, regalado…», añadió. Un «Montaigne» viejo, uno de verdad, sólo por un franco. No tuve inconveniente en dar gusto a aquella mujer por tan poco dinero. Me lo quedé, su «Montaigne».

Bajo el puente, el agua se había vuelto muy espesa. Yo ya no tenía el menor deseo de avanzar. En los bulevares, me tomé un café con leche y abrí aquel libro que me había vendido. Al abrirlo, me encontré con una carta que escribía a su mujer, el Montaigne, precisamente con motivo de la muerte de uno de sus hijos. Me interesó de inmediato, aquel pasaje, probablemente porque lo relacioné al instante con Bébert. *«¡Ahí* -iba y le decía el Montaigne, más o menos así, a su esposa-: *No te preocupes, ¡anda, querida esposa!¡Tienes que consolarte!… ¡Todo se arreglará!… Todo se arregla en la vida… Por cierto, que* -le decía también- *precisamente ayer encontré entre los papeles viejos de un amigo mío una carta que Plutarco envió, también él, a su mujer en circunstancias idénticas a las nuestras… Y, como me ha parecido pero que muy bien escrita, su carta, querida esposa, ¡cojo y te la envío!… ¡Es una carta hermosa! Además, no quiero privarte de ella por más tiempo, ¡ya verás tú como te cura la pena!… ¡Mi querida esposa! ¡ Te la envío, esa hermosa carta! Es una carta, pero, ¡lo que se dice una carta, esa de Plutarco!… ¡Eso desde luego! ¡Vas a ver tú como te va a interesar!… ¡ Ya lo creo! ¡No dejes de consultarla enterita, querida esposa! ¡Léela bien! Enséñasela a los amigos. ¡ Y vuelve a leerla! ¡Ahora me siento del todo tranquilo! ¡Estoy seguro de que te va a devolver el aplomo!… Tu amante esposo. Michel.»* Eso es, me dije, lo que se llama un trabajo de primera. Su mujer debía de estar orgullosa de tener un marido como su Michel, que no se preocupaba. En fin, era asunto de aquella gente. Tal vez nos equivoquemos siempre, a la hora de juzgar el corazón de los demás. ¿Acaso no sentían pena de verdad? ¿Pena de la época?

Pero, en lo relativo a Bébert, había sido un día como para cortársela. No tenía potra yo con Bébert, vivo o muerto. Me parecía que no había nada para él en la Tierra, ni siquiera en Montaigne. Tal vez sea igual para todo el mundo, por lo demás; en cuanto insistes un poco, el vacío. El caso es que yo había salido de Rancy por la mañana y tenía que volver y regresaba con las manos vacías. Nada absolutamente traía para ofrecerle, ni a la tía tampoco.

Una vueltecita por la Place Blanche antes de regresar.

Vi gente por toda la Rué Lepic, aún más que de costumbre. Conque subí yo también, a ver. Delante de una carnicería, había una multitud. Había que apretujarse para ver lo que pasaba, en círculo. Un cerdo era, uno gordo, enorme. Gemía también él, en medio del círculo, como un hombre molestado, pero es que con ganas. Y, además, es que no paraban de hacerle de rabiar. La gente le retorcía las orejas, para oírlo gritar. Culebreaba y se ponía patas arriba, el cerdo, a fuerza de intentar escapar tirando de la cuerda, otros lo chinchaban y lanzaba alaridos aún más fuertes de dolor. Y se reían aún más.

No sabía cómo esconderse, el grueso cerdo, en la poca paja que le habían dejado y que se volaba, cuando gruñía y resoplaba. No sabía cómo escapar de los hombres. Lo comprendía. Orinaba, al mismo tiempo, todo lo que podía, pero eso no servía de nada tampoco. Gruñir, aullar tampoco. No había nada que hacer. Se reían. El chacinero, dentro de su tienda, intercambiaba señas y bromas con los clientes y hacía gestos con un gran cuchillo.

Estaba contento él también. Había comprado el cerdo y lo había atado para hacer propaganda. En la boda de su hija no se divertiría tanto.

Seguía llegando y llegando gente ante la tienda para ver desplomarse el cerdo, con sus gruesos pliegues rosados, tras cada esfuerzo por escapar. Sin embargo, no era bastante aún. Hicieron que se le subiese encima un perrito arisco, al que azuzaban para que saltara y lo mordiese hasta en la carne, dilatada por la gordura. Entonces se divertían tanto, que ya no se podía avanzar. Vino la policía para dispersar los grupos.

Cuando llegas a esas horas a lo alto del puente de Caulaincourt, distingues, más allá del gran lago de noche que hay sobre el cementerio, las primeras luces de Rancy. Está en la otra orilla, Rancy. Hay que dar toda la vuelta para llegar. ¡Está tan lejos! Tanto tiempo hay que andar y tantos pasos que dar en torno al cementerio para llegar a las fortificaciones, que parece como si dieras la vuelta a la noche misma.

Y después, tras llegar a la puerta, en la oficina de arbitrios, pasas aún ante la oficina enmohecida en que vegeta el chupatintas verde. Entonces ya falta muy poco. Los perros de la zona están en su puesto, ladrando. Bajo un farol de gas, hay flores, a pesar de todo, las de la vendedora que espera siempre ahí, a los muertos que pasan día tras día, hora tras hora. El cementerio, otro, al lado, y después el Boulevard de la Révolte. Sube con todos sus faroles derecho y ancho hasta el centro de la noche. Basta con seguir, a la izquierda. Ésa era mi calle. No había nadie, la verdad, con quien encontrarse. Aun así, me habría gustado estar en otra parte y lejos. También me habría gustado ir en zapatillas para que no me oyeran volver a casa.

Y, sin embargo, nada tenía que ver, yo, con que Bébert empeorara. Había hecho todo lo posible. No tenía nada que reprocharme. No era culpa mía que no se pudiese hacer nada en casos así. Llegué hasta delante de su puerta y, me pareció, sin que me vieran. Y después, tras haber subido, miré, sin abrir las persianas, por las rendijas para ver si aún había gente hablando ante la casa de Bébert. Salían aún algunos visitantes de la casa, pero no tenían el mismo aspecto que el día anterior, los visitantes. Una asistenta del barrio, a la que yo conocía bien, lloriqueaba al salir. «Está visto que está aún peor -me decía yo-. En cualquier caso, seguro que no va mejor… ¿Se habrá muerto ya? – me decía yo-. ¡Puesto que hay una que llora ya!…» El día había acabado.

Me preguntaba, de todos modos, si no tenía yo nada que ver con aquello. Mi casa estaba fría y silenciosa. Como una pequeña noche en un rincón de la grande, a propósito para mí sólito.

De vez en cuando llegaban ruidos de pasos y el eco entraba cada vez más fuerte en mi habitación, zumbaba, se extinguía… Silencio. Volví a mirar si pasaba algo fuera, enfrente. Sólo en mí pasaba, siempre haciéndome la misma pregunta.

Acabé quedándome dormido con la pregunta, en mi noche propia, aquel ataúd, de tan cansado que estaba de andar y no encontrar nada.

Más vale no hacerse ilusiones, la gente nada tiene que decirse, sólo se hablan de sus propias penas, está claro. Cada cual a lo suyo, la tierra para todos. Intentan deshacerse de su pena y pasársela al otro, en el momento del amor, pero no da resultado y, por mucho que hagan, la conservan entera, su pena, y vuelven a empezar, intentan otra vez endosársela a alguien. «Es usted muy guapa, señorita», van y dicen. Y reanudan la vida, hasta la próxima vez, en que volverán a probar el mismo miquillo. «¡Es usted guapísima, señorita!…»

Y después venga jactarte, entretanto, de haberte librado de tu pena, pero todo el mundo sabe, verdad, que no es cierto y que te la has guardado pura y simplemente para ti sólito. Como te vuelves cada vez más feo y repugnante con ese juego, al envejecer, ya ni siquiera puedes disimularla, tu pena, tu fracaso, acabas con la cara cubierta de esa fea mueca que tarda veinte, treinta años y más en subir, por fin, del vientre al rostro. Para eso sirve, y para eso sólo, un hombre, una mueca, que tarda toda una vida en fabricarse y ni siquiera llega siempre a terminarla, de tan pesada y complicada que es, la mueca que habría de poner para expresar toda su alma de verdad sin perderse nada.

La mía estaba precisamente perfilándomela bien, con facturas que no lograba pagar, poco elevadas, sin embargo, el alquiler imposible, el abrigo demasiado fino para la temporada y el frutero que se reía por la comisura de los labios al verme contar el dinero, vacilar ante el queso, enrojecer en el momento en que las uvas empezaban a costar caras. Y también por los enfermos, que nunca estaban contentos. Tampoco el golpe de la muerte de Bébert me había beneficiado, en el barrio. Sin embargo, la tía no estaba resentida conmigo. No se podía decir que se hubiera portado mal, la tía, en aquella circunstancia, no. Más bien por el lado de los Henrouille, en su hotelito, empecé a cosechar de repente la tira de problemas y a concebir temores.

Un día, la vieja Henrouille, sin más ni más, salió de su cuarto, dejó a su hijo, a su nuera, y se decidió a venir ella sola a visitarme. No era mala idea. Y después volvió a menudo para preguntarme si de verdad creía yo que estaba loca. Era como una distracción para aquella vieja, venir a propósito a preguntarme eso. Me esperaba en el cuarto que me servía de sala de espera. Tres sillas y un velador.

Y cuando volví a casa aquella noche, me la encontré en la sala de espera consolando a la tía de Bébert, contándole todo lo que había perdido ella, la vieja Henrouille, en punto a parientes por el camino, antes de llegar a su edad, sobrinas por docenas, tíos por aquí, por allá, un padre muy lejos, allí, a mitad del siglo pasado, y más tías y, además, sus propias hijas, desaparecidas, ésas, casi por todas partes, que ya no sabía muy bien ni dónde ni cómo, tan desdibujadas, tan vagarosas, sus propias hijas, que casi se veía obligada a imaginarlas ahora y con mucho esfuerzo aún, cuando quería hablar de ellas a los demás. Ya no eran del todo recuerdos siquiera, sus propios hijos. Arrastraba toda una tribu de defunciones antiguas y humildes en torno a sus viejos flancos, sombras mudas desde hacía mucho, penas imperceptibles que, de todos modos, intentaba

aún remover un poco, con mucha dificultad, para consuelo, cuando yo llegué, de la tía de Bebert.

Y después vino a verme Robinson, a su vez. Le presenté a todos. Amigos.

Fue incluso aquel día, lo recordé más adelante, cuando adquirió la costumbre Robinson de encontrarse en mi sala de espera con la vieja Henrouille. Se hablaban. El día siguiente era el entierro de Bébert. «¿Irá usted? – preguntaba la tía a todos los que encontraba-. Me alegraría mucho que fuera usted…»

«Ya lo creo que iré -respondió la vieja-. Da gusto en esos momentos tener gente, alrededor.» Ya no se la podía retener en su cuchitril. Se había vuelto una pindonga.

«¡Ah, entonces muy bien, si viene usted! – le daba las gracias la tía-. Y usted, señor, ¿vendrá también?», preguntó a Robinson.

«A mí los entierros me dan miedo, señora, no me lo tome en cuenta», respondió él para escabullirse.

Y después cada uno de ellos habló aún lo suyo, sólo de sus asuntos, casi con violencia, incluso la muy vieja Henrouille, que se metió en la conversación. Demasiado alto hablaban todos, como en el manicomio.

Entonces fui a buscar a la vieja para llevarla al cuarto contiguo, donde pasaba consulta.

No tenía gran cosa que decirle. Era ella más bien la que me preguntaba cosas. Le prometí que no insistiría con lo del certificado. Volvimos a la otra habitación a sentarnos con Robinson y la tía y discutimos todos durante una buena hora el infortunado caso de Bébert. Todo el mundo era de la misma opinión, no había duda, en el barrio: que si yo me había esforzado por salvar al pequeño Bébert, que si sólo era una fatalidad, que si me había portado bien, en una palabra, lo que era casi una sorpresa para todo el mundo. La vieja Henrouille, cuando le dijeron la edad del niño, siete años, pareció sentirse mejor y como tranquilizada. La muerte de un niño tan pequeño le parecía sólo un auténtico accidente, no una muerte normal y que pudiera hacerla reflexionar, a ella.

Robinson se puso a contarnos una vez más que los ácidos le quemaban el estómago y los pulmones, lo asfixiaban y le hacían escupir muy negro. Pero la vieja Henrouille, por su parte, no escupía, no trabajaba en los ácidos, conque lo que Robinson contaba sobre ese tema no podía interesarle. Había venido sólo para saber bien a qué atenerse respecto a mí. Me miraba por el rabillo del ojo, mientras yo hablaba, con sus pequeñas pupilas ágiles y azuladas y Robinson no perdía ripio de toda aquella inquietud latente entre nosotros. Estaba obscura mi sala de espera, la alta casa de la otra acera palidecía enteramente antes de ceder ante la noche. Después, sólo se oyeron nuestras voces y todo lo que siempre parecen ir a decir, las voces, y nunca dicen.

Cuando me quedé solo con él, intenté hacerle comprender que no quería volver a verlo en absoluto, a Robinson, pero, aun así, volvió hacia fines de mes y después casi todas las tardes. Es cierto que no se encontraba nada bien del pecho.

«El Sr. Robinson ha vuelto a preguntar por usted… -me recordaba mi portera, que se interesaba por él-. No saldrá de ésta, ¿verdad?… -añadía-. Seguía tosiendo, cuando ha venido…» Sabía muy bien que me irritaba que me hablara de eso.

Es cierto que tosía. «No hay manera -predecía él mismo-, no voy a levantar cabeza nunca…»

«¡Espera al verano próximo! ¡Un poco de paciencia! Ya verás… Se irá solo…»

En fin, lo que se dice en esos casos. Yo no podía curarlo, mientras trabajara con los ácidos… Aun así, intentaba reanimarlo.

«¿Que me voy a curar solo? – respondía-. ¡Me tienes contento!… Como si fuera fácil respirar como yo respiro… A ti me gustaría verte con algo así en el pecho… Te desinflas con una cosa como la que yo tengo en el pecho… Conque ya lo sabes…»

«Estás deprimido, estás pasando por un mal momento, pero cuando te encuentres mejor… Aunque sólo sea un poco, verás…»

«¿Un poco mejor? ¡Al hoyo voy a ir un poco mejor! ¡Mejor me habría ido, sobre todo, quedándome en la guerra! ¡Eso desde luego! A ti sí que te va bien, desde que has vuelto… ¡No puedes quejarte!»

Los hombres se aferran a sus cochinos recuerdos, a todas sus desgracias, y no hay quien los saque de ahí. Con eso ocupan el alma. Se vengan de la injusticia de su presente trabajándose en lo más hondo de su interior con mierda. Justos y cobardes son, en lo más hondo. Es su naturaleza.

Yo ya no le respondía nada. Conque se cabreaba conmigo.

«¡Ya ves que tú también eres de la misma opinión!»

Para estar tranquilo, iba a buscarle un jarabe contra la tos. Es que sus vecinos se quejaban de que no paraba de toser y no podían dormir. Mientras le llenaba la botella, se preguntaba aún dónde había podido pescarla, aquella tos invencible. Me pedía también que le pusiera inyecciones: con sales de oro.

«Si la palmo con las inyecciones, pues mira, ¡no habré perdido nada!»

Pero yo me negaba, por supuesto, a emprender una terapéutica heroica cualquiera. Quería, ante todo, que se fuese.

Yo había perdido los ánimos sólo de verlo andar por la casa. Esfuerzos indecibles me costaba ya no abandonarme a mi propia miseria, no ceder al deseo de cerrar la puerta una vez por todas y veinte veces al día me repetía:

«¿Para qué?» Conque escuchar encima sus jeremiadas era demasiado, la verdad.

«¡No tienes valor, Robinson! – acababa diciéndole-. Deberías casarte, tal vez recuperarías el gusto por la vida…»

Si hubiera tomado esposa, me habría dejado en paz un poco. Al oír eso, se iba muy ofendido. No le

gustaban mis consejos, sobre todo ésos. Ni siquiera me respondía sobre esa cuestión del matrimonio. Era, también es verdad, un consejo muy tonto, el que yo le daba.

Un domingo, en que yo no estaba de servicio, salimos juntos. En la esquina del Boulevard Magnanime, fuimos a la terraza a tomar un casis y un refresco. No hablábamos demasiado, ya no teníamos gran cosa que decirnos. En primer lugar, ¿de qué sirven las palabras, cuando ya sabes a qué atenerte? Para reñir y se acabó. No pasan muchos autobuses los domingos. Desde la terraza es casi un placer ver el bulevar tan limpio, tan descansado también, delante. Oíamos el gramófono de la tasca detrás.

«¿Oyes? – va y me dice Robinson-. Toca canciones de América, ese gramófono; las reconozco, esas canciones, son las mismas que oíamos en Detroit, en casa de Molly…»

Durante los dos años que había pasado allí, no se había enterado apenas de la vida de los americanos; ahora, que le había gustado, de todos modos, su música, con la que intentan evadirse, también ellos, de su terrible rutina y del pesar aplastante de hacer todos los días la misma cosa y gracias a la cual se contonean con la vida, que no tiene sentido, un poco, mientras suena. Osos, aquí, allá.

No se acababa su bebida, de tanto pensar en todo aquello. Un poco de polvo se elevaba por todos lados. En torno a los plátanos, corretean los niños, embadurnados y ventrudos, atraídos, también ellos, por el disco. Nadie se resiste, en el fondo, a la música. No tiene uno nada que hacer con su corazón, lo entrega con gusto. Hay que oír en el fondo de todas las músicas la tonada sin notas, compuesta para nosotros, la melodía de la Muerte.

Algunas tiendas abren también el domingo por cabezonería: la vendedora de zapatillas sale y pasea, parloteando, de un escaparate vecino a otro, sus kilos de varices en las piernas.

En el quiosco, los periódicos de la mañana cuelgan deformados y un poco amarillos ya, formidable alcachofa de noticias ya casi rancia. Un perro se mea, rápido, encima; la vendedora dormita.

Un autobús vacío corre hacia su cochera. Las ideas también acaban teniendo su domingo, te sientes mas afortunado aún que de costumbre. Estás ahí, vacío. Dan ganas de charlar. Estás contento. No tienes nada de que hablar, porque en el fondo no te sucede nada, eres demasiado pobre. ¿Habrás asqueado a la existencia? Sería normal.

«¿No se te ocurre algo, a ti, que pudiera yo hacer, para dejar mi oficio, que me está matando?»

Salía de su reflexión.

«Me gustaría dejarlo, ¿comprendes? Estoy harto de matarme a currelar como un mulo… Quiero ir a pasearme, yo también… ¿No conocerás a alguien que necesite a un chófer, por casualidad?… Conoces la tira de gente, tú.»

Eran ideas de domingo, ideas de caballero, las que se le ocurrían. Yo no me atrevía a disuadirlo, a insinuarle que con una cara de asesino boqueras como la suya nadie le confiaría nunca su automóvil, que siempre conservaría su pinta extraña, con o sin librea.

«La verdad es que no me das muchos ánimos. Entonces, según tú, ¿no voy a librarme nunca?… O sea, ¿que no vale la pena siquiera que lo intente?… En América no corría demasiado, me decías… En África, el calor me mataba… Aquí, no soy bastante inteligente… El caso es que en todas partes algo me sobra o me falta… Pero todo eso, ya lo veo, ¡son cuentos! ¡Ah, si tuviera pasta!… Todo el mundo me consideraría muy simpático aquí… allá… Y en todas partes… En América incluso… ¿Acaso no es verdad lo que digo? ¿Y tú?… Lo que nos haría falta es ser propietarios de una casita de pisos con seis inquilinos que pagaran puntuales…»

«Eso sí que es verdad», respondí.

No salía de su asombro por haber llegado a esa importante conclusión él solo. Conque me echó una mirada rara, como si de repente descubriera en mí un aspecto insólito de desgraciado.

«La verdad es que tú, cuando lo pienso, eres capitán general. Vendes tus trolas a los que están cascando y todo lo demás te la trae floja… Nadie te controla, nada… Llegas y te marchas cuando quieres; en una palabra, tienes libertad… Pareces amable, pero, ¡menudo cabrón estás hecho tú, en el fondo!…»

«¡Eres injusto, Robinson!»

«Oye, búscame algo, ¡anda!»

Estaba decidido a dejar para otros su trabajo con los ácidos…

Nos marchamos por las callejuelas laterales. Al atardecer, aún se podría pensar que es un pueblo Rancy. Las puertas de los huertos están entornadas. El gran patio está vacío. La casita del perro, también. Una tarde, como ésta, hace ya mucho, los campesinos se marcharon de su casa, expulsados por la ciudad, que salía de París. Ya sólo quedan uno o dos comercios de aquellos tiempos, invendibles y enmohecidos e invadidos ya por las glicinas fláccidas, que cuelgan por las paredes, carmesíes de tanto anuncio pegado. La rastra colgada entre dos canalones ya no puede herrumbrarse más. Es un pasado que ya nadie toca. Se va sólito. Los inquilinos de ahora están demasiado cansados por la tarde como para ponerse a arreglar nada delante de sus casas, cuando regresan. Se limitan a ir con sus mujeres a apretujarse en las tascas que quedan y beber. El techo muestra las marcas del humo de los quinqués colgantes de entonces. Todo el barrio temblequea sin quejarse con el continuo runrún de la nueva fábrica. Las tejas musgosas caen rodando sobre los salientes adoquines, como sólo existen ya en Versalles y en las prisiones venerables.

Robinson me acompañó hasta el parquecillo municipal, totalmente rodeado de almacenes, adonde van a olvidarse sobre los céspedes tiñosos todos los abandonados de los alrededores, entre la bolera para los viejos chochos, la Venus raquítica y el montículo de arena para jugar a hacer pis. Y nos pusimos a hablar otra vez de

esto y lo otro.

«Mira, lo que siento es no poder soportar la bebida. – Su obsesión-. Cuando bebo, me da un dolor de estómago, que es que me muero. ¡Peor aún! – Y me demostraba al instante, con una serie de eructos, que ni siquiera había soportado bien la bebida de aquella misma tarde-. ¿Ves? Así.»

Delante de su portal, se despidió de mí. «El Castillo de las Corrientes de Aire», como él decía. Desapareció. Yo creía que no iba a volver a verlo por un tiempo.

Mis negocios parecieron recuperarse un poco y justo aquella misma noche.

Simplemente, de la casa donde estaba la comisaría me llegaron dos llamadas urgentes. El domingo por la noche todos los suspiros, las emociones, las impaciencias se desmadran. El amor propio está de vacaciones y además achispado. Tras una jornada entera de libertad alcohólica, los esclavos, mira por dónde, se estremecen un poco, cuesta trabajo hacerlos comportarse, resoplan, bufan y hacen sonar sus cadenas.

Tan sólo en la casa en la que estaba la comisaría, se desarrollaban dos dramas a la vez. En el primero agonizaba un canceroso, mientras que en el tercero había un aborto y la comadrona no conseguía ventilarlo. Daba, aquella matrona, consejos absurdos a todo el mundo, al tiempo que enjuagaba toallas y más toallas. Y después, entre dos inyecciones, se escapaba para ir a pinchar al canceroso de abajo, a diez francos la ampolla de aceite de alcanfor; baratito, ¿no? Para ella la jornada no tenía desperdicio.

Todas las familias de aquella casa habían pasado el domingo en camisón y en mangas de camisa haciendo frente a los acontecimientos y bien reforzadas, las familias, por alimentos salpimentados. Apestaba a ajo y a olores aún más sabrosos por los pasillos y la escalera. Los perros se divertían haciendo cabriolas hasta el sexto. La portera quería enterarse de todo. Te la encontrabas por todos lados. Sólo bebía blanco, ésa, porque el tinto prolonga la regla.

La comadrona, enorme y con bata, ponía en escena los dos dramas, en el primero, en el tercero, saltarina, transpirante, arrebatada y vindicativa. Mi llegada la irritó. Ella que tenía a su público bien cogido, la diva.

En vano me las ingenié para tratarla con tino, para hacerme notar lo menos posible, considerar todo bien (cuando, en realidad, no había hecho, en su misión, sino abominables torpezas); mi llegada, mis palabras, la horrorizaban. No había nada que hacer. Una comadrona vigilada es tan amable como un panadizo. Ya no sabes dónde ponerla para que te perjudique lo menos posible. Las familias desbordaban por el piso, desde la cocina hasta los primeros peldaños, mezclándose con los otros parientes de la casa. ¡Y menudo si había parientes! Gordos y flacos aglomerados en racimos somnolientos bajo las luces de los quinqués colgantes. Pasaba el tiempo y llegaban más, de provincias, donde la gente se acuesta antes que en París. Esos ya estaban hartos. Todo lo que yo les contaba, a aquellos parientes del drama de abajo como a los del de arriba, se lo tomaban a mal.

La agonía del primer piso duró poco. Tanto mejor y tanto peor. En el preciso momento en que le subía el último suspiro, su médico de cabecera, el doctor Omanon, subió, mira por dónde, como si tal cosa, para ver si había muerto, su cliente, y me echó una bronca él también, o casi, porque me encontró a su cabecera. Entonces le expliqué, a Omanon, que estaba de servicio municipal del domingo y que mi presencia era muy natural y volví a subir al tercero con mucha dignidad.

La mujer de arriba seguía sangrando por el chichi. Poco le faltaba para ponerse a morir también sin tardanza. Un minuto para ponerle una inyección y ahí me teníais otra vez, abajo, junto al tipo de Omanon. Todo había terminado. Omanon acababa de marcharse. Pero, de todos modos, se había quedado con mis veinte francos, el muy cabrón. Un fracaso. Conque no quise perderme el sitio que había conseguido en la casa del aborto. Así es que subí a escape.

Ante la vulva sangrante, expliqué más cosas aún a la familia. La comadrona, evidentemente, no opinaba como yo. Parecía casi que se ganara su parné contradiciéndome. Pero yo estaba allí, mala suerte, ¡allá películas si le gustaba o no! ¡Se acabaron las fantasías! ¡Me iba a ganar por lo menos cien pavos, si sabía montármelo y persistir! Calma de nuevo y ciencia, ¡qué leche! Resistir los asaltos en forma de comentarios y preguntas llenas de vino blanco que se cruzan implacables por encima de tu cabeza inocente es un currelo que para qué, nada cómodo. La familia decía lo que pensaba entre suspiros y eructos. La comadrona esperaba, por su parte, que yo metiera la pata bien, que me largase y le dejase los cien francos. Pero, ¡ya podía esperar sentada, la comadrona! Y mi alquiler, ¿qué? ¿Quién lo pagaría? Aquel parto iba de culo desde por la mañana, ya lo creo. Sangraba de lo lindo, ya lo creo también, pero no salía, ¡y había que saber aguantar!

Ahora que el otro canceroso había muerto abajo, su público de agonía subía, furtivo, aquí. Puestos a pasar la noche en blanco, hecho ya el sacrificio, había que aprovechar para no perderse ninguna de las distracciones de los alrededores. La familia de abajo vino a ver si la cosa iba a terminar allí tan mal como en su casa. Dos muertos en la misma noche, en la misma casa, ¡iba a ser una emoción para toda la vida! ¡Ni más ni menos! Se oía, por los cascabeles, a los perros de todo el mundo saltando y haciendo cabriolas por las escaleras. Subían también, ésos. Gente venida de lejos entraba, con lo que ya no se cabía, susurrando. Las jovencitas aprendían de repente «las cosas de la vida», como dicen las madres; ponían, tiernas, cara de enteradas ante la desgracia. El instinto femenino de consolar. Un primo, que las espiaba desde por la mañana, estaba muy sorprendido. Ya no las dejaba ni a sol ni a sombra. Era una revelación en su fatiga. Todo el mundo estaba descamisado. Se casaría con una de ellas, el primo, pero le habría gustado verles las piernas también, ya que estaba, para poder elegir mejor.

Aquella expulsión de feto no avanzaba, el conducto debía de estar seco, no se deslizaba, sólo seguía

sangrando. Iba a ser su sexto hijo. ¿Dónde estaba el marido? Lo mandé llamar.

Había que encontrar al marido para poder enviar a su mujer al hospital. Una parienta me lo había propuesto, que la enviara al hospital. Una madre de familia que quería irse a acostar, qué caramba, por los niños. Pero, cuando se habló del hospital, ya no se ponían de acuerdo. A unos les parecía bien lo del hospital, otros se mostraban absolutamente contrarios, por las conveniencias. No querían ni siquiera oír hablar de eso. Incluso se dijeron al respecto palabras duras, entre parientes, que no olvidarían nunca. Pasaron a la familia. La comadrona despreciaba a todo el mundo. Pero era al marido a quien yo, por mi parte, quería encontrar para poder consultarlo, para que nos decidiéramos, por fin, en un sentido o en otro. Entonces va y sale de entre un grupo, más indeciso aún que todos los demás, el marido. Y, sin embargo, era él quien tenía que decidir. ¿El hospital? ¿O no? ¿Qué quería? No sabía. Quería mirar. Conque fue y miró. Le destapé el agujero de su mujer, de donde chorreaban coágulos y después gluglús y luego toda su mujer entera, que mirara. Su mujer, que gemía como un perro enorme al que hubiera pillado un auto. No sabía, en una palabra, lo que quería. Le pasaron un vaso de blanco para darle fuerzas. Se sentó.

Aun así, no se le ocurría nada. Era un hombre, aquel, que trabajaba con ganas durante el día. Todo el mundo lo conocía bien en el mercado y en la estación sobre todo, donde cargaba sacos de los hortelanos, y no pequeños, grandes y pesados, desde hacía quince años. Era famoso. Llevaba pantalones anchos, vagarosos, y la chaqueta también. No los perdía, pero no parecían importarle demasiado, la chaqueta y los pantalones. Sólo la tierra y seguir derecho en pie sobre ella parecía importarle, con los dos pies separados, como si se fuera a poner a temblar, la tierra, de un momento a otro, debajo. Pierre se llamaba.

Esperamos. «¿Qué te parece, Pierre?», le preguntaron por turnos todos. Se rascó y después fue a sentarse, aquel Pierre, a la cabecera de su mujer, como si le costara reconocerla, ella que no paraba de traer al mundo dolores, y después lloró, algo así como una lágrima, Pierre, y después se volvió a levantar. Entonces volvieron a hacerle la misma pregunta. Fui preparando un volante para ingreso en el hospital. «¡Vamos, piensa, Pierre!», le pedía todo el mundo. Lo intentaba, desde luego, pero hacía señas de que no le venía. Se levantó y fue a vacilar hacia la cocina llevándose el vaso. ¿Para qué esperarlo? Habría podido durar el resto de la noche, su vacilación de marido, todo el mundo lo comprendía perfectamente. Mejor irse a otra parte.

Cien francos perdidos para mí, ¡y se acabó! Pero, de todos modos, con aquella comadrona habría tenido problemas… Estaba visto. Y, además, ¡que no me iba a meter en maniobras operatorias delante de todo el mundo, con lo cansado que estaba! «¡Mala suerte! – me dije-. ¡Vámonos! Otra vez será… ¡Resignación! ¡Dejemos a la puta de la naturaleza en paz!»

Apenas había llegado al descansillo, cuando ya me buscaban todos y el marido perdiendo el culo tras mí.

«¡Eh, doctor! – fue y me gritó-. ¡No se vaya!»

«¿Qué quiere usted que haga?», le respondí.

«¡Espere! ¡Lo acompaño, doctor!… ¡Por favor, señor doctor!…»

«De acuerdo», le dije y entonces le dejé acompañarme hasta abajo. Y fuimos y bajamos. Al pasar por el primero, entré, de todos modos, a decir adiós a la familia del muerto canceroso. El marido entró conmigo en la habitación, volvimos a salir. En la calle, caminaba a mi paso. Fuera hacía un frío que pelaba. Encontramos un perrito que se entrenaba a responder a los otros de la zona con largos aullidos. Y menudo si era cabezón y lastimero. Ya sabía ladrar con ganas. Pronto sería un perro de verdad.

«Hombre, pero si es "Yema de huevo" -observó el marido; muy contento de reconocerlo y cambiar de conversación-. Lo criaron con biberón las hijas del lavandero de la Rué des Gonesses, este jodio, siempre salido… ¿Las conoce usted, a las hijas del lavandero?»

«Sí», respondí.

Sin dejar de caminar, se puso a contarme, entonces, las formas que había de criar a los perros con leche sin que saliera demasiado caro. De todos modos, seguía, detrás de aquellas palabras, buscando una idea en relación con lo de su mujer.

Había una tasca abierta cerca del portal.

«¿Entra usted, doctor? Le invito a un café…»

No iba yo a despreciárselo. «¡Entremos! – dije-. Dos con leche.» Y aproveché para hablarle otra vez de su mujer. Eso le ponía muy serio, que le hablara de ella, pero yo seguía sin conseguir que se decidiera. Sobre la barra sobresalía un ramo de flores. Por el santo del dueño de la tasca, Martrodin. «¡Un regalo de los chavales!», nos anunció en persona. Conque tomamos un vermut con él, para no despreciárselo. Por encima de la barra se veía aún el texto de la ley sobre la embriaguez y un certificado de estudios enmarcado. De repente, al ver aquello, el marido se empeñó en que Martrodin le recitara los nombres de todas las subprefecturas de Loiret-Cher, porque él se los había aprendido y aún se los sabía. Después, se empeñó en que el nombre que figuraba en el certificado no era el del dueño de la tasca y entonces se enfadaron y volvió a sentarse a mi lado, el marido. La duda se apoderó de él por entero. Tanto le preocupaba, que ni siquiera me vio marchar…

Nunca volví a verlo, al marido. Nunca. Me sentía muy decepcionado por todo lo que había sucedido aquel domingo y, además, muy fatigado.

En la calle, apenas había hecho cien metros, cuando me vi a Robinson, que venía hacia mí, cargado con toda clase de tablas, pequeñas y grandes. A pesar de la obscuridad, lo reconocí. Muy molesto por haberme encontrado, se escabullía, pero lo detuve.

«Conque, ¿no has ido a acostarte?», le dije.

«¡Un momento!… -me respondió-. ¡Vuelvo de las obras!»

«¿Qué vas a hacer con toda esa madera? ¿Obras también?… ¿Un ataúd?… ¿Las has robado al menos?…»

«No, una conejera…»

«¿Crías conejos ahora?»

«No, es para los Henrouille…»

«¿Los Henrouille? ¿Tienen conejos?»

«Sí, tres, que van a poner en el patio, ya sabes, donde vive la vieja…»

«Pues, ¡vaya unas horas de hacer conejeras!…»

«Es una idea de su mujer…»

«Pues, ¡menuda idea!… ¿Qué quiere hacer con los conejos? ¿Venderlos? ¿Sombreros de copa?…»

«Mira, eso se lo preguntas, cuando la veas; a mí con que me dé los cien francos…»

Aquella idea me parecía muy rara, la verdad, así, de noche. Insistí.

Entonces cambió de conversación.

«Pero, ¿cómo es que has ido a su casa? – volví a preguntarle-. Tú no los conocías, a los Henrouille.»

«Me llevó la vieja a su casa, el día que la conocí en tu consulta… Es una charlatana, esa vieja, cuando se pone… No te puedes hacer idea… No hay quien la haga callar… Conque se hizo como amiga mía y después ellos también… Hay gente que me aprecia, ¡para que veas!…»

«Nunca me habías contado nada de eso a mí… Pero, ya que vas a su casa, debes de saber si la van a mandar internar, a la vieja.»

«No, por lo que me han dicho, no han podido…»

Aquella conversación no le hacía ninguna gracia, lo notaba, yo, no sabía cómo librarse de mí. Pero cuanto más se escabullía más me empeñaba yo en enterarme…

«La verdad es que la vida es dura, ¿no te parece? Hay que recurrir a unas cosas, ¿eh?», repetía con vaguedad. Pero yo volvía al tema. Estaba decidido a no dejarle escurrir el bulto…

«Dicen que tienen más dinero de lo que parece, los Henrouille. ¿Qué piensas tú, ahora que vas a su casa?»

«Sí, es muy posible que tengan, pero, de todos modos, ¡les encantaría deshacerse de la vieja!»

El disimulo no había sido nunca su fuerte.

«Es que como la vida, verdad, está cada día más cara, les gustaría deshacerse de ella. Me dijeron que tú no querías certificar que estaba loca… ¿Es verdad?»

Y, sin esperar a mi respuesta, me preguntó con mucho interés hacia dónde me dirigía.

«¿Y tú? ¿Vuelves de una visita?»

Le conté un poco mi aventura con el marido que acababa de perder por el camino. Eso le hizo reír con ganas; sólo, que al mismo tiempo le hizo toser.

Se encogía tanto, en la obscuridad, para toser, que casi no lo veía yo, aun tan cerca; las manos, sólo, le veía un poco, que se juntaban despacio como una gran flor pálida delante de la boca y temblando en la obscuridad. No cesaba nunca. «¡Son las corrientes de aire!», dijo, por fin, al acabar de toser, cuando llegábamos ante su casa.

«Eso sí, ¡menudo si hay corrientes de aire en mi casa! ¡Y pulgas también! ¿Tienes tú también pulgas en tu casa?…»

Tenía, en efecto. «Pues, claro -le respondí-. Las cojo en casa de los enfermos.»

«¿No te parece que huele a meado en las casas de los enfermos?», me preguntó entonces.

«Sí y a sudor también…»

«De todos modos -dijo despacio, tras haberlo pensado-, me habría gustado mucho, a mí, ser enfermero.»

«¿Por qué?»

«Porque, digan lo que digan, los hombres, verdad, cuando están sanos, dan miedo… Sobre todo desde la guerra… Yo sé en qué piensan… No siempre se dan cuenta de ello… Pero yo sé ahora en qué piensan… Cuando están de pie, piensan en matarte… Mientras que, digan lo que digan, cuando están enfermos no dan tanto miedo… Ya te digo, puedes esperarte cualquier cosa, cuando están de pie. ¿No es verdad?»

«¡Ya lo creo que es verdad!», no me quedó más remedio que decir.

«¿Y tú? ¿No fue por eso también por lo que te hiciste médico?», me preguntó, además.

Después de pensarlo, me di cuenta de que tal vez tuviera razón Robinson. Pero en seguida le dieron nuevos ataques de tos.

«Tienes los pies mojados, vas a coger una pleuresía, andando por ahí de noche… Anda, vete a casa -le aconsejé-. Ve a acostarte…»

De tanto toser, se ponía nervioso.

«La vieja Henrouille, ¡a ésa sí que le van a dar para el pelo!», fue y me dijo, tosiendo y riendo, al oído.

«¿Cómo así?»

«¡Ya verás!…», fue y me dijo.

«¿Qué están tramando?»

«No te puedo decir nada más… Ya verás…»

«Venga, cuéntame, Robinson, no seas desgraciado, ya sabes que yo no repito nada a nadie…»

Ahora, de repente, sentía deseos de contármelo todo, tal vez para demostrarme al mismo tiempo que no había que considerarlo tan resignado y rajado como parecía.

«¡Anda! – lo insté en voz muy baja-. Sabes de sobra que yo no hablo nunca…»

Era la excusa que necesitaba para confesarse.

«Eso no se puede negar, sabes callarte», reconoció. Y entonces fue y se puso en serio a cantar de plano…

Estábamos solos, a aquella hora, en el Boulevard Contumance.

«¿Recuerdas -comenzó-, la historia de los vendedores de zanahorias?»

Al principio, yo no recordaba aquella historia.

«¡Que sí, hombre! – insistió-. ¡Si me la contaste tú mismo!…»

«¡Ah, sí!…» Y de repente la recordé con claridad.

«¿El ferroviario de la Rué des Brumaires?… ¿El que recibió un petardo en los testículos, al ir a robar los conejos?…»

«Sí, en la frutería del Quai d'Argenteuil…»

«¡Es cierto!… Ahora caigo -dije-. ¿Y qué?» Porque aún no veía yo qué tenía que ver aquella historia con el caso de la vieja Henrouille.

No tardó en concretar.

«¿Es que no comprendes?»

«No», dije… Pero después no quise comprender más.

«Pues, ¡anda que no tardas tú ni nada!…»

«Es que me parece que vas por mal camino, pero que muy malo… -No pude por menos de observar-. ¿No iréis a asesinar a la vieja Henrouille ahora para complacer a la nuera?»

«Mira, yo me limito a hacer la conejera que me han pedido… Del petardo serán ellos quienes se ocupen… si quieren…»

«¿Cuánto te han dado por eso?»

«Cien francos por la madera más doscientos cincuenta francos por el trabajo y luego mil francos más por el asunto simplemente… Y como comprenderás… Esto es sólo el comienzo… Es una historia que, bien contada, ¡es como una renta!… Eh, chaval, ¿te das cuenta?…»

Me daba cuenta, en efecto, y no me sorprendía demasiado. Me entristecía y se acabó, un poco más. Todo lo que se dice para disuadir a la gente en esos casos es insignificante siempre. ¿Acaso la vida es considerada con ellos? ¿De quién o de qué van a tener piedad, entonces? ¿Para qué? ¿De los demás? ¿Se ha visto alguna vez a alguien bajar al infierno a substituir a otro? Nunca. Se ve enviar a otros a él. Y se acabó.

La vocación de asesino que de repente se había apoderado de Robinson me parecía, en resumidas cuentas, como una especie de progreso más bien frente a lo que había observado hasta entonces en la otra gente, siempre dividida entre el odio y el cariño, siempre aburrida por la imprecisión de sus tendencias. Desde luego, por haber seguido en la noche a Robinson hasta donde habíamos llegado, yo había aprendido cosas, la verdad.

Pero había un peligro: la Ley. «Es peligrosa -observé-la Ley. Si te cogen, con tu salud, vas dado… No saldrás de la cárcel… ¡No resistirás!…»

«Mala suerte, entonces -me respondió-. Estoy demasiado harto de la vida normal, de todo el mundo… Eres viejo, esperas aún tu ocasión de divertirte y cuando llega… después de mucha paciencia, si llega… estás muerto y enterrado desde hace mucho… Son para los inocentes, los oficios honrados, como se suele decir… Además, tú lo sabes tan bien como yo…»

«Puede ser… Pero los otros, los golpes duros, todo el mundo los probaría, si no hubiera riesgos… Y la policía tiene mala leche, ya lo sabes… Hay sus pros y sus contras…» Examinábamos la situación.

«No te digo que no, pero, como comprenderás, trabajando como yo trabajo, en las condiciones en que estoy, sin dormir, tosiendo, en currelos que no aguantaría una mula… Ahora nada peor me puede ocurrir… En mi opinión… Nada…»

No me atrevía a decirle que, a fin de cuentas, tenía razón, por los reproches que podría haberme hecho más adelante, si el nuevo plan llegaba a fracasar.

Para animarme, me enumeró algunos buenos motivos para no preocuparme de la vieja, porque, para empezar, no le quedaban, al fin y al cabo, muchos años de vida, en cualquier caso, por ser ya muy mayor. En resumidas cuentas, iba a preparar su marcha y se acabó.

De todos modos, era un asunto muy feo, pero que muy feo. Habían convenido todos los detalles, entre él y los hijos: como la vieja había vuelto a adoptar la costumbre de salir de su casa, una noche la enviarían a llevar la comida a los conejos… El petardo estaría preparado… Le estallaría en plena cara en cuanto tocase la puerta… Exactamente así había sido en la frutería… Ya tenía fama de loca en el barrio, el accidente no sorprendería a nadie… Dirían que se le había avisado para que no se acercara nunca a la conejera… Que había desobedecido… Y a su edad, seguro que no saldría con vida de un petardazo como el que le iban a preparar… así, en plena jeta.

Buena la había hecho yo, la verdad, contando aquella historia a Robinson.

Y volvió la música con la verbena, la que acompaña al recuerdo más lejano, desde la infancia, la que no cesa nunca, aquí y allá, en los rincones de la ciudad, en los lugarejos del campo, en todos los sitios donde los pobres van a sentarse el fin de semana, para saber qué ha sido de ellos. ¡El Paraíso!, les dicen. Y después se toca música para ellos, ora aquí ora allá, de una estación del año a otra, que con su sonido ramplón fusila todas las melodías que bailaban el año anterior los ricos. Es la música de organillo que sale del tiovivo, de los automóviles que no lo son, en realidad, de las montañas en absoluto rusas y del tablado del luchador que no

tiene bíceps ni viene de Marsella, de la mujer que no tiene barba, del mago que es cornudo, del órgano que no es de oro, detrás del tiro al blanco cuyos huevos están vacíos. Es la fiesta para engañar a la gente el fin de semana.

¡Y a beber la cerveza sin espuma! Pero al camarero, por su parte, le apesta el aliento, la verdad, bajo los falsos bosquecillos. Y el cambio que devuelve contiene monedas extrañas, tan extrañas, que, semanas y semanas más tarde, aún no has acabado de examinarlas y te cuesta mucho trabajo deshacerte de ellas, al dar limosna. La verbena, vamos. Hay que divertirse como se pueda, entre el hambre y la cárcel, y tomar las cosas como vengan. Si estás sentado, no tienes motivo para quejarte. Algo es algo. «Le Tir des Nations», el mismo, volví a verlo, el que Lola había descubierto, tantos años antes, en las avenidas del parque de Saint-Cloud. Se vuelve a ver de todo en las verbenas; eructos de alegría, las verbenas. Desde entonces debían de haber vuelto a pasearse las muchedumbres en la gran avenida de Saint-Cloud… Los paseantes. La guerra había terminado. Por cierto, ¿sería el mismo propietario? ¿Habría vuelto de la guerra ése? Todo me interesaba. Reconocí los blancos, pero ahora disparaban, además, contra aeroplanos. Novedad. El progreso. La moda. La boda seguía allí, los soldados también y la Alcaldía con su bandera. Todo, en una palabra. Con muchas más cosas a las que disparar incluso que antes.

Pero la gente se divertía mucho más con los coches de choque, invención reciente, por los accidentes que no cesaban de suceder en ellos y las espantosas sacudidas que te producen en la cabeza y en las tripas. No cesaban de llegar otros atontados y boceras para chocar salvajemente, amontonarse en desorden una y otra vez y destrozarse el bazo dentro de los coches. Y no había manera de hacerlos desistir. Nunca pedían clemencia, jamás parecían haber sido tan felices. Algunos es que deliraban. Había que arrancarlos a sus catástrofes. Si les hubieran dado la muerte en premio por un franco, se habrían precipitado sobre los coches igual. Hacia las cuatro debía tocar, a mitad de la fiesta, la banda. Para reunir la banda, costaba Dios y ayuda, a causa de las tascas que los acaparaban a todos, por turno, a los músicos. Siempre faltaba uno. Lo esperaban. Iban a buscarlo. Mientras lo esperaban, mientras regresaban, volvía a darles sed y otros dos que desaparecían. Y vuelta a empezar.

Las rosquillas, estropeadas con tanto polvo, se volvían reliquias y daban una sed atroz a los ganadores.

Las familias, por su parte, esperaban a los fuegos artificiales para ir a acostarse. Esperar forma parte también de la fiesta. En la sombra tiritaban mil botellas, que a cada instante vibraban bajo las mesas. Pies que se agitaban para consentir o rebelarse. Ya no se oye la música, de tan conocidas que son las melodías, ni los asmáticos cilindros de los motores tras las barracas donde se mueven las atracciones que se pueden ver por dos francos. El corazón, cuando estás un poco bebido de fatiga, te resuena en las sienes. ¡Bim! ¡Bim! Así hace contra la especie de terciopelo ajustado a la cabeza y en el fondo de los oídos. Así es como llegas a estallar un día. ¡Así sea! Un día en que el movimiento de dentro se une al de fuera y en que todas tus ideas se desparraman y van a divertirse por fin con las estrellas.

Había muchos lloros en toda la feria, por los niños pisoteados, aquí y allá, entre las sillas, sin querer, y también por aquellos a los que enseñaban a dominar los deseos, los inocentes e inmensos goces de montar una y mil veces en el tiovivo. Hay que aprovechar la verbena para formar el carácter. Nunca es demasiado pronto para empezar. No saben aún, esos monines, que todo se paga. Creen que es por simpatía por lo que las personas mayores detrás de las taquillas iluminadas incitan a los clientes a gozar de las maravillas que atesoran, dominan y defienden con sonrisas vociferantes. No conocen la ley, los niños. A tortazos se la enseñan los padres, la ley, y los defienden contra los placeres.

La única verbena auténtica es la del comercio, profunda y secreta, además. Por la noche es cuando goza el comercio, cuando todos los inconscientes, los clientes, bobos paganos, se han marchado, cuando ha vuelto el silencio sobre la explanada y el último perro ha proyectado por fin su última gota de orina contra el billar japonés. Entonces pueden iniciarse las cuentas. Es el momento en que el comercio hace el recuento de sus fuerzas y sus víctimas con los cuartos.

El último domingo de verbena por la noche, la criada de Martrodin, el tabernero, se hizo una herida bastante profunda en la mano, al cortar salchichón.

Hacia las últimas horas de aquella misma noche todo a nuestro alrededor se volvió bastante claro, como si las cosas se hubieran hartado de rodar de una orilla a otra del destino, indecisas, hubiesen salido todas a un tiempo de la sombra y se hubieran puesto a hablarme. Pero hay que desconfiar de las cosas y de las personas en esos momentos. Crees que van a hablar, las cosas, y resulta que no dicen nada y vuelven a hundirse en la noche, muchas veces sin que hayas podido comprender lo que tenían que contarte. Ésa es, al menos, mi experiencia.

En fin, el caso es que volví a ver a Robinson en el café de Martrodin aquella misma noche, justo cuando iba a curar a la criada del tabernero. Recuerdo con exactitud las circunstancias. A nuestro lado había unos árabes, apretados en las banquetas y somnolientos. No parecía interesarles en absoluto lo que ocurría a su alrededor. Al hablar con Robinson, yo procuraba no volver a la conversación de la otra noche, cuando lo había sorprendido transportando tablas. La herida de la criada era difícil de coser y en el fondo del local no veía demasiado bien. Con tanta atención, no podía hablar. En cuanto hube acabado, Robinson me llevó a un rincón y me confirmó, él mismo, que estaba decidido, su asunto, y pronto iba a ser. Una confidencia así me molestaba mucho y habría preferido no recibirla.

«Pronto, ¿qué?»

«Ya sabes lo que quiero decir…»
«¿Sigues con eso?…»
«¡Adivina cuánto me dan ahora!»
Yo no tenía el menor interés en adivinar.
«¡Diez mil!… Sólo por guardar silencio…»
«¡Una bonita suma!»

«Ya me veo libre de apuros, ni más ni menos -añadió-.

¡Son los diez mil francos que siempre me habían faltado!… ¡Los diez mil francos del comienzo, vamos!… ¿Comprendes?… A decir verdad, yo nunca he tenido un oficio, pero, ¡con diez mil francos!…» Ya debía de haberles hecho chantaje. Quería que me diera cuenta de todo lo que iba a poder hacer, emprender, con aquellos diez mil francos… Me dejaba tiempo para pensarlo, apoyado él en la pared, en la penumbra. Un mundo nuevo. ¡Diez mil francos!

De todos modos, al volver a pensar en su asunto, yo me preguntaba si no correría algún riesgo yo personalmente, si no me estaba dejando llevar a una como complicidad, al no hacer ver al instante que desaprobaba su plan. Debería haberlo denunciado incluso. La moral de la Humanidad, a mí, me la trae floja, como a todo el mundo, por cierto. ¿Qué puedo hacer? Pero no hay que olvidar las cochinas historias y complicaciones que remueve la Justicia en el momento de un crimen sólo para divertir a los viciosos de los contribuyentes… Entonces ya no sabes cómo escapar… Ya lo había visto yo, eso. A la hora de escoger una miseria u otra, yo prefería la que no arma escándalo a la que se expone en los periódicos.

En resumidas cuentas, me sentía intrigado y fastidiado a un tiempo. Tras haber llegado hasta allí, me faltaba valor para seguir de verdad hasta el fondo del asunto. Ahora que había que abrir los ojos en la noche, casi prefería mantenerlos cerrados. Pero Robinson parecía interesado en que los abriera, en que me diese cuenta.

Para cambiar de conversación un poco, sin dejar de caminar, saqué a colación el tema de las mujeres. No le gustaban demasiado a él, las mujeres.

«Mira, de mujeres, yo paso, la verdad -decía-, con sus hermosos traseros, sus muslos gruesos, sus bocas en forma de corazón y sus vientres, en los que siempre crece algo, unas veces mocosos y otras enfermedades… ¡Con sus sonrisas no se paga el alquiler! ¿No? Ni siquiera a mí, en mi chabola, me serviría de nada, si tuviese una mujer, enseñar su culo al propietario a principios de mes, ¡no me iba a hacer una rebaja por eso!…»

La independencia era su debilidad, para Robinson. Él mismo lo decía. Pero el patrón, Martrodin, ya estaba cansado de nuestros «apartes» y nuestras intrigas en los rincones.

«¡Robinson, los vasos! ¡Joder! – ordenó-. ¿Es que voy a tener que lavarlos yo?»

Robinson dio un salto.

«Es que -me informó- trabajo unas horas aquí.»

Era la verbena, no había duda. Martrodin encontraba mil dificultades para acabar de contar su caja, eso le irritaba. Los árabes se fueron, salvo los dos que dormitaban aún contra la puerta.

«¿A qué esperan, ésos?»

«¡A la criada!», me respondió el patrón.

«¿Qué tal, los negocios?», fui y le pregunté entonces, por decir algo.

«Así así… Pero, ¡cuesta lo suyo! Mire, doctor, este local lo compré por sesenta billetes, al contado, antes de la crisis. Tendría que sacarle al menos doscientos… ¿Se da usted cuenta?… Es cierto que se llena, pero de árabes sobre todo… Ahora, que esa gente no bebe… Aún no tienen costumbre… Tendrían que venir polacos. Ésos, doctor, ésos sí que beben, la verdad… Donde estaba yo antes, en las Ardenas, menudo si tenía polacos, y que venían de los hornos de esmalte, no le digo más, ¿eh? ¡Venían ardiendo, de los hornos!… ¡Eso es lo que necesitaríamos aquí!… ¡La sed!… Y el sábado tiraban la casa por la ventana… ¡La Virgen! ¡Eso era currelar! ¡La paga entera! ¡Tracatrá!… Éstos, los moros, no es beber lo que les interesa, sino darse por culo… está prohibido beber en su religión, por lo visto, pero darse por culo no…»

Los despreciaba, Martrodin, a los moros. «¡Unos cabrones, vamos! ¡Hasta parece que se lo hacen a mi criada!… Son unos degenerados, ¿eh? ¡Vaya unas ideas! ¿Eh, doctor? ¿Qué le parece?»

El patrón, Martrodin, se apretaba con sus cortos dedos las bolsitas serosas que tenía bajo los ojos. «¿Qué tal los riñones? – le pregunté, al verle hacer eso. Yo lo trataba de los riñones-. Al menos, ya no tomará usted sal.»

«¡Albúmina otra vez, doctor! Antes de ayer encargué el análisis al farmacéutico… Oh, me importa tres cojones diñarla -añadió- de albúmina o de otra cosa, pero lo que me fastidia es trabajar como trabajo… ¡para sacar tan poco!…»

La criada había acabado de lavar los platos, pero la venda le había quedado tan sucia con los restos de comida, que hube de volver a hacérsela. Me ofreció un billete de cinco francos. Yo no quería aceptarlos, sus cinco francos, pero se empeñó en dármelos. Sévérine, se llamaba.

«¿Te has cortado el pelo, Sévérine?», comenté.

«¡Qué remedio! ¡Está de moda! – dijo-. Y, además, que el pelo largo con la cocina de aquí coge todos los olores…»

«¡Tu culo huele mucho peor! – la interrumpió Martrodin, que no podía hacer sus cuentas con nuestra cháchara-. Y eso no impide a tus clientes…»

«Sí, pero no es igual -replicó la Sévérine, muy ofendida-. Una cosa es el olor del pelo y otra el del culo… Y usted, patrón, ¿quiere que le diga a qué huele usted?… ¿No en una parte del cuerpo, sino en todo él?»

Estaba muy irritada, Sévérine. Martrodin no quiso oír el resto. Volvió a sus cochinas cuentas refunfuñando.

Sévérine no conseguía quitarse las zapatillas, con los pies hinchados por el servicio, para ponerse los zapatos. Conque se las dejó puestas para marcharse.

«¡Pues dormiré con ellas!», comentó incluso en voz alta al final.

«¡Venga, vete a apagar la luz al fondo! – le ordenó Martrodin-. ¡Cómo se ve que no me la pagas tú, la

electricidad!»

«Con ellas dormiré», gimió Sévérine otra vez, al levantarse.

Martrodin no acababa nunca con sus sumas. Se había quitado el delantal y después el chaleco para mejor contar. Las pasaba canutas. Del fondo invisible del local nos llegaba un tintineo de platos, la tarea de Robinson y del otro lavaplatos. Martrodin trazaba grandes cifras infantiles con un lápiz azul que aplastaba entre sus gruesos dedos de asesino. La criada sobaba delante de nosotros, desgalichada en la silla. De vez en cuando, recuperaba un poco la conciencia en el sueño.

«¡Ay, mis pies! ¡Ay, mis pies!», decía entonces y después volvía a caer en la somnolencia.

Pero Martrodin se puso a despertarla con un buen berrido:

«¡Eh, Sévérine! ¡Llévate afuera a tus moros, venga! ¡Ya estoy harto!… ¡Daros el piro todos, hostias! Que ya es hora.»

Ellos, los árabes, no parecían tener la menor prisa, a pesar de la hora. Sévérine se despertó, por fin. «¡Es verdad que tengo que irme! – convino-. ¡Gracias, patrón!» Se llevó consigo a los dos moros. Se habían juntado para pagarle.

«Me los ventilo a los dos esta noche -me explicó, al marcharse-. Porque el domingo que viene no voy a poder, voy a Achares a ver a mi niño. Es que el sábado que viene es el día que libra la nodriza.»

Los árabes se levantaron para seguirla. No parecían nada sinvergüenzas. De todos modos, Sévérine los miraba un poco de soslayo, por el cansancio. «Yo no soy de la opinión del patrón, ¡yo prefiero a los moros! No son brutales como los polacos, los moros, pero son viciosos…

De eso no hay duda, son unos viciosos… En fin, que hagan todo lo que quieran, ¡no creo que eso me quite el sueño! ¡Venga! – les llamó-. ¡Vamos, chicos!»

Y se marcharon los tres, ella unos pasos delante. Los vimos cruzar la plaza apagada, salpicada con los restos de la verbena; el último farol iluminó el grupo brevemente y después se hundieron en la noche. Oímos un poco aún sus voces y después ya nada. Ya no había nada.

Salí de la tasca, a mi vez, sin haber vuelto a hablar con Robinson. El patrón me deseó un montón de cosas. Un agente de policía recorría el bulevar. Al pasar, animábamos el silencio. Un comerciante, aquí, allá, se sobresaltaba, liado con su cálculo agresivo, como un perro royendo un hueso. Una familia de juerga ocupaba toda la calle berreando en la esquina de la Place Jean-Jaurés, ya no avanzaba, ni un paso, aquella familia, vacilaba ante una callejuela, como una flotilla de pesca en plena tormenta. El padre tropezaba de una acera a otra y no paraba de orinar.

La noche estaba en casa.

Recuerdo también otra noche, por aquella época, a causa de las circunstancias. En primer lugar, un poco después de la hora de cenar, oí un estruendo de cubos de basura. Sucedía con frecuencia en mi escalera, que zarandearan los cubos de la basura. Y después, los gemidos de una mujer, quejas. Entorné mi puerta, pero sin moverme.

Si salía espontáneamente en el momento de un accidente, tal vez me hubieran considerado un simple vecino y mi socorro médico habría parecido gratuito. Si me necesitaban, ya podían llamarme como Dios manda y entonces les costaría veinte francos. La miseria persigue implacable y minuciosa al altruismo y las iniciativas más amables reciben su castigo implacable. Conque esperé a que vinieran a llamar, pero nadie vino. Para economizar seguramente.

Sin embargo, casi había dejado de esperar, cuando apareció una niña ante mi puerta, estaba leyendo los nombres en los timbres… En definitiva, era a mí a quien venía a buscar de parte de la Sra. Henrouille.

«¿Quién está enfermo en casa de los Henrouille?», le pregunté.

«Es para un señor que se ha herido en su casa…»

«¿Un señor?» En seguida pensé en el propio Henrouille.

«¿Él?… ¿El Sr. Henrouille?»

«No… Un amigo que está en su casa…»

«¿Lo conoces, tú?»

«No.» Nunca lo había visto, a ese amigo.

Fuera hacía frío, la niña corría, yo andaba de prisa.

«¿Cómo ha ocurrido?»

«Eso no lo sé.»

Costeamos otro jardincillo, último recinto de un antiguo bosque, donde por la noche venían a enredarse entre los árboles las largas brumas de invierno, suaves y lentas. Callejuelas, una tras otra. En unos instantes llegamos hasta su hotelito. La niña me dijo adiós. Tenía miedo de acercarse más. Henrouille nuera me esperaba en la escalera con marquesina. Su quinqué de petróleo vacilaba al viento.

«¡Por aquí, doctor! ¡Por aquí!», me llamó.

Yo le pregunté, al instante: «¿Es su marido quien se ha herido?»

«¡Entre, entre!», me dijo bastante brusca, sin darme tiempo a pensar. Y me tropecé con la vieja, que desde el pasillo se puso a chillar y acosarme. Una andanada.

«¡Si serán cabrones! ¡Si serán bandidos! ¡Doctor! ¡Han intentado matarme!»

Conque habían fracasado.

«¿Matarla? – dije yo, como muy sorprendido-. ¿Y por qué?»

«Porque no me decidía a diñarla bastante rápido, ¡no te fastidia! ¡Ni más ni menos! ¡La madre de Dios! ¡Ya lo creo que no quiero morirme!»

«¡Mamá! ¡Mamá! – la interrumpía la nuera-. ¡No está usted en su sano juicio! Pero, bueno, mamá, ¡le está usted contando cosas horribles al doctor!…»

«Cosas horribles, ¿verdad? Pues, mira, bicho, ¡tienes una cara como un templo! Conque no estoy en mi sano juicio, ¿eh? ¡Aún me queda bastante juicio para mandaros a todos a la horca! ¡Para que te enteres!»

«Pero, ¿quién es el herido? ¿Dónde está?»

«¡Ahora lo verá usted! – me cortó la vieja-. ¡Está ahí arriba, en la cama, el asesino! Y, además, la ha ensuciado bien, la cama, ¿eh, bicho? ¡Lo ha ensuciado bien, tu asqueroso colchón, con su cochina sangre! ¡Y no con la mía! ¡Sangre que debe de ser como basura! ¡No lo vas a acabar de lavar nunca! Va a apestar durante siglos a sangre de asesino, ¡ya verás tú! ¡Ah! ¡Hay gente que va al teatro en busca de emociones! Pero, mire, ¡está aquí, el teatro! ¡Está aquí, doctor! ¡Ahí arriba! ¡Y un teatro de verdad! ¡No fingido! ¡No vaya a quedarse sin sitio! ¡Suba rápido! ¡Tal vez esté muerto, ese cochino canalla, cuando llegue usted! Conque, ¡no va usted a ver nada!»

La nuera temía que la oyesen desde la calle y le ordenaba callar. Pese a las circunstancias, no me parecía demasiado desconcertada, la nuera, muy contrariada sólo porque las cosas hubiesen salido torcidas, pero seguía con su idea. Incluso estaba absolutamente convencida de haber tenido razón.

«Pero, bueno, ¿ha escuchado usted eso, doctor? Fíjese, ¡lo que hay que oír! ¡Yo que, al contrario, siempre he intentado facilitarle la vida! Bien lo sabe usted… Yo que siempre le he propuesto ingresarla en el asilo de las hermanitas…»

Sólo le faltaba eso, a la vieja, oír hablar otra vez de las hermanitas.

«¡Al Paraíso! Sí, puta, ¡allí queríais enviarme todos! ¡La muy canalla! ¡Y para eso lo hicisteis venir, tu marido y tú, al sinvergüenza ese de ahí arriba! Para matarme, ya lo creo, y no para enviarme con las hermanitas, ¡si lo sabré yo! Le ha salido el tiro por la culata, eso sí que sí, ¡que lo había preparado bien mal! Vaya, doctor, a ver cómo ha quedado, ese cabrón, y, además, ¡él sólito se lo ha hecho!… ¡Y es de esperar que reviente! ¡Vaya, doctor! ¡Vaya a verlo, mientras está aún a tiempo!…»

Si la nuera no parecía desanimada, la vieja aún menos.

Y eso que había estado a punto de no contarlo, pero no estaba tan indignada como aparentaba. Camelo. Aquel asesinato fallido la había estimulado más bien, la había sacado de aquella como tumba sombría en que se había recluido desde hacía tantos años, en el fondo del jardín enmohecido. A su edad, una vitalidad tenaz volvía a embargarla. Gozaba de modo indecente con su victoria y también con el placer de disponer de un medio de fastidiar, para siempre, a la agarrada de su nuera. Ahora la tenía en sus manos. No quería que se ocultara ni un solo detalle de aquel atentado fallido y de cómo había sucedido.

«Y, además -proseguía, dirigiéndose a mí, en el mismo tono exaltado-, fue en casa de usted, verdad, donde lo conocí, al asesino, en su casa de usted, señor doctor… ¡Y eso que desconfiaba de él!… ¡Vaya si desconfiaba!… ¿Sabes lo que me propuso primero? ¡Liquidarte a ti, chica! ¡A ti, bicho! ¡Y barato también! ¡Te lo aseguro! ¡Es que propone lo mismo a todo el mundo! ¡Ya se sabe!… Conque ya ves, desgraciada, ¡si sé yo bien a lo que se dedicaba tu compinche! ¡Si estoy informada, eh! ¡Robinson se llama!… ¿A ver si no? ¡Anda, di que no se llama así! En cuanto lo vi rondando por aquí con vosotros, sospeché en seguida… ¡Y bien que hice! ¿Dónde estaría ahora, si no hubiera desconfiado?»

Y la vieja me contó una y otra vez cómo había sucedido todo. El conejo se había movido, mientras él ataba el petardo junto a la puerta de la jaula. Entretanto, ella, la vieja, lo observaba desde su refugio, «¡en primera fila!», como ella decía. Y el petardo con todas las postas le había explotado en plena cara, mientras preparaba su truco, en sus propios ojos. «No se está tranquilo, al hacer un asesinato. ¡Como es lógico!», concluyó.

En fin, que había sido el colmo de la torpeza y del fracaso.

«¡Así los han vuelto, a los hombres de ahora! ¡Exacto! ¡A eso los acostumbran! – insistía la vieja-. ¡Ahora tienen que matar para comer! Ya no les basta con robar su pan sólo… ¡Y matar a abuelas, además!… Eso nunca se había visto… ¡Nunca!… ¡Es el fin del mundo! ¡Ya sólo piensan en hacer daño! Pero, ¡ahora estáis todos hasta el cuello en ese maleficio!… ¡Y ése está ciego ahora! ¡Y vais a tener que cargar con él para siempre!… ¿Eh?… ¡Y no vais a acabar de aprender bribonadas!…»

La nuera no rechistaba, pero ya debía de haber preparado su plan para salir del paso. Era una canalla reconcentrada. Mientras nosotros nos entregábamos a las reflexiones, la vieja se puso a buscar a su hijo por las habitaciones.

«Y, además, es cierto, ¡tengo un hijo, doctor! ¿Dónde se habrá ido a meter? ¿Qué más estará tramando?»

Oscilaba por el pasillo, presa de unas carcajadas que no acababan nunca.

Que un viejo se ría, y tan fuerte, es algo que apenas ocurre salvo en los manicomios. Es como para preguntarse, al oírlo, adonde vamos a ir a parar. Pero estaba empeñada en encontrar a su hijo. Se había escapado a la calle. «¡Muy bien! ¡Que se esconda y que viva mucho aún! ¡Le está bien empleado verse obligado a vivir con ese otro que está ahí arriba! ¡A vivir los dos juntos, con ése, que no va a ver más! ¡A alimentarlo! ¡Es que le ha explotado en plena jeta, su petardo! ¡Lo he visto yo! ¡Lo he visto todo! Así, ¡bum! ¡Es que lo he visto todo! Y no era un conejo, ¡se lo aseguro! ¡Huy, la Virgen! Pero, ¿dónde está mi hijo, doctor? ¿Dónde está? ¿No lo ha visto usted? Es un canalla de mucho cuidado, también ése, que siempre ha sido un hipócrita peor aún que el otro, pero ahora todo el horror ha acabado saliendo de su cochina persona,

¡menudo! ¡Ah! Tarda mucho en salir, ¡qué leche!, de una persona tan horrible. Pero, cuando sale, ¡es que ya es putrefacción de verdad! ¡No hay que darle vueltas, doctor! ¡No se lo pierda!» Y seguía divirtiéndose. También quería asombrarme con su superioridad ante los acontecimientos y confundirnos a todos de una vez, humillarnos, en una palabra.

Se había hecho con un papel favorable, que le proporcionaba emoción. Una felicidad inagotable. Mientras eres capaz aún de desempeñar un papel, tienes asegurada la felicidad. Las jeremiadas, para vejestorios, lo que le habían ofrecido desde hacía veinte años, la tenían harta, a la vieja Henrouille. Ese papel, que le habían brindado en bandeja, virulento, inesperado, ya no lo soltaba. Ser viejo es no encontrar ya un papel vehemente que desempeñar, es caer en un eterno e insípido «día sin función», donde ya sólo se espera la muerte. El gusto por la vida recuperaba, la vieja, de pronto, con un papel vehemente de revancha. De pronto, ya no quería morir, nunca. Con ese deseo de supervivencia, con esa afirmación, estaba radiante. Recuperar el fuego, un fuego de verdad en el drama.

Se caldeaba, ya no quería abandonarlo, el fuego nuevo, abandonarnos. Durante mucho tiempo, había dejado casi de creer en él. Había llegado a un punto en que ya no sabía qué hacer para no abandonarse a la muerte en el fondo de su absurdo jardín y, de repente, se veía envuelta, mira por dónde, en una tremenda tormenta de actualidad dura, bien a lo vivo.

«¡Mi muerte! – gritaba ahora la vieja Henrouille-. ¡Quiero verla, mi muerte! ¿Me oyes? ¡Tengo ojos, yo, para verla! ¿Me oyes? ¡Aún tengo ojos, yo! ¡Quiero verla bien!»

Ya no quería morir, nunca. Estaba claro. Ya no creía en su muerte.

Ya se sabe que esas cosas son siempre difíciles de arreglar y que arreglarlas cuesta siempre muy caro. Para empezar, no sabían siquiera dónde meter a Robinson. ¿En el hospital? Eso podía provocar mil habladurías, evidentemente, chismes… ¿Enviarlo a su casa? No había ni que pensar en eso tampoco, por el estado en que tenía la cara. Conque, con gusto o no, los Henrouille se vieron obligados a guardarlo en su casa.

A él, en la cama de la habitación de arriba, no le llegaba la camisa al cuerpo. Auténtico terror sentía de que lo pusieran en la puerta y lo denunciasen. Era comprensible. Era una de esas historias que no se podían, la verdad, contar a nadie. Mantenían las persianas de su cuarto bien cerradas, pero la gente, los vecinos, empezaron a pasar por la calle más a menudo que de costumbre, sólo para mirar los postigos y preguntar por el herido. Les daban noticias, les contaban trolas. Pero, ¿cómo impedir que se extrañaran? ¿Que chismorreasen? Conque exageraban la historia. ¿Cómo evitar las suposiciones? Por fortuna, aún no se había presentado ninguna denuncia concreta ante los tribunales. Ya era algo. En cuanto a su cara, yo hice lo que pude. No apareció ninguna infección y eso que la herida fue de lo más anfractuosa y sucia. En cuanto a los ojos, hasta en la córnea, yo preveía la existencia de cicatrices, a través de las cuales la luz no pasaría sino con mucha dificultad, si es que llegaba a pasar otra vez, la luz.

Ya buscaríamos un medio de arreglarle, mal que bien, la visión, si es que le quedaba algo que se pudiera arreglar. De momento, había que remediar la urgencia y sobre todo evitar que la vieja llegara a comprometernos a todos con sus chungos chillidos ante los vecinos y los curiosos. Ya podía pasar por loca, que eso no siempre explica todo.

Si la policía se ponía a examinar nuestras aventuras, sabe Dios adonde nos arrastraría, la policía. Impedir ahora a la vieja que se comportara escandalosamente en su patinillo constituía una empresa delicada. Teníamos que intentar calmarla, por turno. No podíamos tratarla con violencia, pero la suavidad tampoco daba resultado siempre. Ahora la embargaba un sentimiento de venganza, nos hacía chantaje, sencillamente.

Yo iba a ver a Robinson, dos veces al día por lo menos. Gemía bajo las vendas, en cuanto me oía subir la escalera. Sufría, desde luego, pero no tanto como intentaba aparentar. Ya iba a tener motivos para afligirse, preveía yo, y mucho más aún cuando se diera cuenta exacta de cómo le habían quedado los ojos… Yo me mostraba bastante evasivo en relación con el porvenir. Los párpados le ardían mucho. Se imaginaba que era por esa comezón por lo que no veía.

Los Henrouille se habían puesto a cuidarlo muy escrupulosamente, según mis indicaciones. Por ese lado no había problema.

Ya no se hablaba del intento. Tampoco se hablaba del futuro. Cuando yo me despedía de ellos por la noche, nos mirábamos todos por turno y con tal insistencia todas las veces, que siempre me parecía inminente la posibilidad de que se suprimieran de una vez por todas unos a otros. Ese fin, pensándolo bien, me parecía lógico y oportuno. Las noches de aquella casa me resultaban difíciles de imaginar. Sin embargo, volvía a encontrármelos por la mañana y continuábamos juntos con las personas y las cosas donde nos habíamos quedado la noche anterior. La Sra. Henrouille me ayudaba a renovar el apósito con permanganato y entreabríamos un poco las persianas, para probar. Todas las veces en vano. Robinson no advertía siquiera que acabábamos de entreabrirlas…

Así gira el mundo a través de la noche amenazadora y silenciosa.

Y el hijo me recibía todas las mañanas con una observación campesina: «Fíjese, doctor… ¡Ya son las últimas heladas!», comentaba lanzando los ojos al cielo bajo el pequeño peristilo. Como si eso tuviera importancia, el tiempo que hacía. Su mujer iba a intentar una vez más parlamentar con la suegra a través de la puerta atrancada y lo único que conseguía era aumentar su furia.

Mientras estuvo vendado, Robinson me contó cómo se había iniciado en la vida. En el comercio. Sus padres lo habían colocado, ya a los once años, en una zapatería de lujo para hacer recados. Un día que fue a

entregar, una clienta lo invitó a gustar un placer que hasta entonces sólo había imaginado. No había vuelto nunca a casa del patrón, de tan abominable que le había parecido su propia conducta. En efecto, follarse a una clienta en la época de que hablaba era aún un acto imperdonable. Sobre todo la camisa de aquella clienta, de muselina pura, le había causado una impresión extraordinaria. Treinta años después, la recordaba exactamente, aquella camisa. Con la dama de los frufrús en su piso atestado de cojines y de cortinas con flecos, su carne rosa y perfumada, el pequeño Robinson se había llevado elementos para posteriores comparaciones desesperadas e interminables.

Sin embargo, muchas cosas habían sucedido después. Había visto continentes, guerras enteras, pero nunca se había recuperado del todo de aquella revelación. Pero le divertía volver a pensar en ello, volver a contarme esa especie de minuto de juventud que había tenido con la clienta. «Tener los ojos cerrados así hace pensar -comentaba-. Es como un desfile… Parece que tuvieras un cine en la chola…» Yo no me atrevía aún a decirle que iba a tener tiempo de cansarse de su cinillo. Como todos los pensamientos conducen a la muerte, llegaría un momento en que sólo la vería a ésa, en su cine.

Justo al lado del hotelito de los Henrouille funcionaba ahora una pequeña fábrica con un gran motor dentro. Hacía temblar el hotelito de la mañana a la noche. Y otras fábricas, un poco más allá, que martilleaban sin cesar, cosas y más cosas, hasta de noche. «Cuando caiga la choza, ¡ya no estaremos! –bromeaba Henrouille al respecto, un poco inquieto, de todos modos-. ¡Por fuerza acabará cayendo!» Era cierto que el techo se desgranaba ya sobre el suelo en cascotes pequeños. Por mucho que un arquitecto los hubiera tranquilizado, en cuanto te parabas a escuchar las cosas del mundo te sentías en su casa como en un barco, un barco que fuera de un temor a otro. Pasajeros encerrados y que pasaban mucho tiempo haciendo proyectos aún más tristes que la vida y economías también y, recelosos, además, de la luz y también de la noche.

Henrouille subía al cuarto después de comer para leerle un poco a Robinson, como yo le había pedido. Pasaban los días. La historia de aquella maravillosa clienta que había poseído en la época de su aprendizaje se la contó también a Henrouille. Y acabó siendo un motivo de risa general, la historia, para todo el mundo en la casa. Así acaban nuestros secretos, en cuanto los aireamos en público. Lo único terrible en nosotros y en la tierra y en el cielo acaso es lo que aún no se ha dicho. No estaremos tranquilos hasta que no hayamos dicho todo, de una vez por todas, entonces quedaremos en silencio por fin y ya no tendremos miedo a callar. Listo.

Durante las semanas que aún duró la supuración de los párpados, pude entretenerlo con cuentos sobre sus ojos y el porvenir. Unas veces decíamos que la ventana estaba cerrada, cuando, en realidad, estaba abierta de par en par; otras veces, que estaba muy obscuro fuera.

Sin embargo, un día, estando yo vuelto de espaldas, fue hasta la ventana él mismo para darse cuenta y, antes de que yo pudiera impedírselo, se había quitado las vendas de los ojos. Vaciló un momento. Tocaba, a derecha e izquierda, los montantes de la ventana, se negaba a creer, al principio, y, después, no le quedó más remedio que creer, de todos modos. Qué remedio.

«¡Bardamu! – me gritó entonces-. ¡Bardamu! ¡Está abierta, la ventana! ¡Te digo que está abierta!» Yo no sabía qué responderle, me quedé como un imbécil allí delante. Tenía los dos brazos extendidos por la ventana, al aire fresco. No veía nada, evidentemente, pero sentía el aire. Los alargaba entonces, sus brazos, así, en su obscuridad, todo lo que podía, como para tocar el final. No lo quería creer. Obscuridad para él sólito. Volví a conducirlo hasta la cama y le di nuevos consuelos, pero ya no me creía. Lloraba. Había llegado al final él también. Ya no se le podía decir nada. Llega un momento en que estás completamente solo, cuando has alcanzado el fin de todo lo que te puede suceder. Es el fin del mundo. La propia pena, la tuya, ya no te responde nada y tienes que volver atrás entonces, entre los hombres, sean cuales fueren. No eres exigente en esos momentos, pues hasta para llorar hay que volver adonde todo vuelve a empezar, hay que volver a reunirse con ellos.

«Entonces, ¿qué van a hacer ustedes con él, cuando mejore?», pregunté a la nuera durante el almuerzo que siguió a aquella escena. Precisamente me habían pedido que me quedara a comer con ellos, en la cocina. En el fondo, no sabían demasiado bien, ninguno de los dos, cómo salir de aquella situación. El desembolso de una pensión los espantaba, sobre todo a ella, mejor informada aún que él sobre los precios de los subsidios para impedidos. Incluso había hecho ya algunas gestiones ante la Asistencia Pública. Gestiones de las que procuraban no hablarme.

Una noche, después de mi segunda visita, Robinson intentó retenerme junto a él por todos los medios, para que me fuera un poco más tarde aún. No acababa de contar todo lo que se le ocurría, recuerdos de las cosas y los viajes que habíamos hecho juntos, incluso de lo que aún no habíamos intentado recordar. Se acordaba de cosas que aún no habíamos tenido tiempo de evocar. En su retiro, el mundo que habíamos recorrido parecía afluir con todas las quejas, las amabilidades, los trajes viejos, los amigos de los que nos habíamos separado, una auténtica leonera de emociones trasnochadas que inauguraba en su cabeza sin ojos.

«¡Me voy a matar!», me avisaba, cuando su pena le parecía demasiado grande. Y después conseguía avanzar un poco más, de todos modos, con su pena, como una carga demasiado pesada para él, infinitamente inútil, por un camino en el que no encontraba a nadie a quien hablar de ella, de tan enorme y múltiple que era. No habría sabido explicarla, era una pena que superaba su instrucción.

Cobarde como era, yo lo sabía, y él también, por naturaleza, aún abrigaba la esperanza de que lo salvaran de la verdad, pero, por otro lado, yo empezaba a preguntarme si existía en alguna parte gente cobarde de verdad… Parece que siempre se puede encontrar, para cualquier hombre, un tipo de cosas por las que está

dispuesto a morir y al instante y bien contento, además. Sólo, que no siempre se presenta su ocasión, de morir tan ricamente, la ocasión a su gusto. Entonces se va a morir como puede, en alguna parte… Se queda ahí, el hombre, en la tierra con aspecto de alelado, además, y de cobarde para todo el mundo, pero sin convencimiento, y se acabó. Es sólo apariencia, la cobardía.

Robinson no estaba dispuesto a morir en la ocasión que se le presentaba. Tal vez presentada de otro modo le hubiera gustado mucho más.

En resumen, la muerte es algo así como una boda.

Esa muerte no le gustaba en absoluto y se acabó. No había más que hablar.

Conque iba a tener que resignarse a aceptar su hundimiento y desamparo. Pero de momento estaba del todo ocupado, del todo apasionado, embadurnándose el alma de modo repulsivo con su desgracia y su desamparo. Más adelante, pondría orden en su desgracia y entonces empezaría una nueva vida de verdad. Qué remedio.

«Créeme, si quieres -me recordaba, zurciendo retazos de memoria así, por la noche, después de cenar-, pero, mira, en inglés, aunque nunca he tenido demasiada facilidad para las lenguas, había llegado, de todos modos, a poder sostener una pequeña conversación, al final, en Detroit… Bueno, pues, ahora ya casi he olvidado todo, todo salvo una cosa… Dos palabras… Que me vienen a la cabeza todo el tiempo desde que me ocurrió esto en los ojos: *Gentlemen first!* Es casi lo único que puedo decir ahora de inglés, no sé por qué… Desde luego, es fácil de recordar… *Gentlemen first!* Y, para intentar hacerlo cambiar de ideas, nos divertíamos hablando juntos inglés de nuevo. Entonces repetíamos, pero a menudo: *Gentlemen first!* a tontas y a locas, como idiotas. Un chiste exclusivo para nosotros. Acabamos enseñándoselo al propio Henrouille, que subía de vez en cuando a vigilarnos.

Al remover los recuerdos, nos preguntábamos qué quedaría aún de todo aquello… Lo que habíamos conocido juntos… Nos preguntábamos qué habría sido de Molly, nuestra buena Molly… A Lola, en cambio, quería olvidarla, pero, a fin de cuentas, me habría gustado tener noticias de todas, aun así, de la pequeña Musyne también, de paso… Que no debía de vivir demasiado lejos, en París, ahora. Al lado, vamos… Pero habría tenido que emprender auténticas expediciones, de todos modos, para tener noticias de Musyne… Entre tanta gente, cuyos nombres, trajes, costumbres, direcciones había olvidado y cuyas amabilidades y sonrisas incluso, después de tantos años de preocupaciones, de ansias de comida, debían de haberse vuelto como quesos viejos a fuerza de muecas penosas… Los propios recuerdos tienen su juventud… Se convierten, cuando los dejas enmohecer, en fantasmas repulsivos, que no rezuman sino egoísmo, vanidades y mentiras… Se pudren como manzanas… Conque nos hablábamos de nuestra juventud, la saboreábamos y volvíamos a saborear. Desconfiábamos. A mi madre, por cierto, llevaba mucho sin ir a verla… Y esas visitas no me sentaban nada bien en el sistema nervioso… Era peor que yo, para la tristeza, mi madre… Siempre en el cuchitril de su tienda, parecía acumular todas las decepciones que podía a su alrededor después de tantos y tantos años… Cuando iba a verla, me contaba: «Mira, la tía Hortense murió hace dos meses en Coutances… Ya podrías haber ido… Y Clémentin, ¿sabes quién digo?… ¿El encerador que jugaba contigo, cuando eras pequeño?… Bueno, pues, a ése lo recogieron antes de ayer en la Rué d'Aboukir… No había comido desde hacía tres días…»

La infancia, la suya, no sabía Robinson por dónde cogerla, cuando pensaba en ella, pues menos alegre era difícil de imaginar. Aparte del episodio con la clienta, no encontraba en ella nada que no lo desesperara hasta vomitar en los rincones, como en una casa donde no hubiera sino cosas repugnantes y que apestasen, escobas, cubos, adefesios, bofetadas… El señor Henrouille no tenía nada que contar de la suya hasta la mili, salvo que en aquella época le habían hecho la foto de chorchi con borla y que seguía aún ahora, esa foto, justo encima del armario de luna.

Cuando Henrouille había vuelto a bajar, Robinson me comunicaba su miedo a no cobrar ahora sus diez mil francos prometidos… «En efecto, ¡no cuentes demasiado con ellos!», le decía yo mismo. Prefería prepararlo para esa otra decepción.

Trocitos de plomo, lo que quedaba de la descarga, afloraban en los bordes de las heridas. Yo se los quitaba por etapas, unos pocos cada día. Le hacía mucho daño, cuando le hurgaba así justo por encima de las conjuntivas.

En vano habíamos tomado toda clase de precauciones, la gente del barrio se había puesto a hablar, de todos modos, con ganas. Por fortuna, Robinson no tenía idea de esas habladurías, se habría puesto aún más enfermo. Estábamos, ni que decir tiene, envueltos en sospechas. Henrouille hija hacía cada vez menos ruido al recorrer la casa en zapatillas. No contabas con ella y te la encontrabas a tu lado.

Ahora que estábamos en medio de los arrecifes, la menor duda bastaría ahora para hacernos zozobrar a todos. Todo iría entonces a reventar, resquebrajarse, chocar, deshacerse y desparramarse por la orilla. Robinson, la abuela, el petardo, el conejo, los ojos, el hijo inverosímil, la nuera asesina, quedaríamos desplegados ahí, entre todas nuestras basuras y nuestros cochinos pudores, ante los curiosos estremecidos. Yo no las tenía todas conmigo. No es que hubiera hecho nada, yo, verdaderamente criminal. Era sobre todo culpable por desear en el fondo que todo aquello continuara. E incluso no veía ya inconveniente en que nos fuéramos todos juntos a pasear cada vez más lejos en la noche.

Pero es que no había necesidad siquiera de desear, la cosa seguía sola, ¡y a escape, además!

Los ricos no necesitan matar en persona para jalar. Dan trabajo a los demás, como ellos dicen. No hacen el

mal en persona, los ricos. Pagan. Se hace todo lo posible para complacerlos y todo el mundo muy contento. Mientras que sus mujeres son bellas, las de los pobres son feas. Es así desde hace siglos, aparte de los vestidos elegantes. Preciosas, bien alimentadas, bien lavadas. Desde que el mundo es mundo, no se ha llegado a otra cosa.

En cuanto al resto, en vano te esfuerzas, resbalas, patinas, vuelves a caer en el alcohol, que conserva a los vivos y a los muertos, no llegas a nada. Está más que demostrado. Y desde hace tantos siglos que podemos observar nuestros animales nacer, penar y cascar ante nosotros, sin que les haya ocurrido, tampoco a ellos, nada extraordinario nunca, salvo reanudar sin cesar el mismo fracaso insípido donde tantos otros animales lo habían dejado. Sin embargo, deberíamos haber comprendido lo que ocurría. Oleadas incesantes de seres inútiles vienen desde el fondo de los tiempos a morir sin cesar ante nosotros y, sin embargo, seguimos ahí, esperando cosas… Ni siquiera para pensar la muerte servimos.

Las mujeres de los ricos, bien alimentadas, bien engañadas, bien descansadas, ésas, se vuelven bonitas. Eso es cierto. Al fin y al cabo, tal vez eso baste. No se sabe. Sería al menos una razón para existir.

«Las mujeres en América, ¿no te parece que eran más bellas que las de aquí?» Cosas así me preguntaba, Robinson, desde que daba vueltas a los recuerdos de los viajes. Sentía curiosidades, se ponía a hablar incluso de las mujeres.

Ahora yo iba a verlo un poco menos a menudo, porque fue por aquella época cuando me destinaron a la consulta de un pequeño dispensario para tuberculosos de la vecindad. Hay que llamar las cosas por su nombre, con eso me ganaba ochocientos francos al mes. Los enfermos eran sobre todo gente de las chabolas, esa como aldea que nunca consigue desprenderse del todo del barro, encajonada entre las basuras y bordeada de senderos donde las chavalas demasiado despiertas y mocosas hacen novillos para pescar, junto a las vallas, de un sátiro a otro, un franco, patatas fritas y la blenorragia. País de cine de vanguardia, donde la ropa sucia infesta los árboles y todas las ensaladas chorrean orina los sábados por la noche. En mi terreno, no hice, durante aquellos meses de práctica especializada, ningún milagro. Y, sin embargo, había gran necesidad de milagros. Pero a mis clientes no les interesaba que yo hiciera milagros; contaban, al contrario, con su tuberculosis para que los pasaran del estado de miseria absoluta en que se asfixiaban desde siempre al de miseria relativa que confieren las minúsculas pensiones del Estado. Arrastraban sus esputos más o menos positivos de licencia en licencia desde la guerra. Adelgazaban a fuerza de fiebre mantenida por la poca comida, los muchos vómitos, la enormidad de vino y el trabajo, de todos modos, un día de cada tres, a decir verdad.

La esperanza de la pensión los poseía en cuerpo y alma. Les llegaría un día, como la gracia, la pensión, con tal de que tuvieran fuerza para esperar un poco aún, antes de cascarla del todo. No se sabe lo que es volver y esperar algo hasta que no se ha observado lo que pueden llegar a esperar y volver los pobres que esperan una pensión.

Pasaban tardes y semanas enteras esperando, en la entrada y en el umbral de mi miserable dispensario, mientras fuera llovía, y removiendo sus esperanzas de porcentajes, sus deseos de esputos francamente bacilares, esputos de verdad, esputos tuberculosos «ciento por ciento». La curación venía mucho después que la pensión en sus esperanzas; también pensaban, desde luego, en la curación, pero apenas, hasta tal punto los embelesaba el deseo de ser rentistas, un poquito rentistas, en cualesquiera condiciones. Ya no podían existir en ellos, aparte de ese deseo intransigente, definitivo, sino pequeños deseos subalternos y su propia muerte se volvía, en comparación, algo bastante accesorio, un riesgo deportivo como máximo. La muerte, al fin y al cabo, no es sino cuestión de unas horas, de minutos incluso, mientras que una renta es como la miseria, algo que dura toda la vida. Los ricos se emborrachan de otro modo y no pueden llegar a comprender esos frenesíes por la seguridad. Ser rico es otra embriaguez, es olvidar. Para eso incluso es para lo que se llega a rico, para olvidar.

Poco a poco había perdido yo la costumbre de prometerles la salud, a mis enfermos. No podía alegrarlos demasiado, la perspectiva de estar bien de salud. Al fin y al cabo, estar bien de salud no es sino un apaño. Sirve para trabajar, la salud, ¿y qué más? Mientras que una pensión del Estado, aun ínfima, es algo divino, pura y simplemente.

Cuando no se tiene dinero para ofrecer a los pobres, más vale callarse. Cuando se les habla de otra cosa, y no de dinero, se los engaña, se miente, casi siempre. Los ricos son fáciles de divertir, con simples espejos, por ejemplo, para que en ellos se contemplen, ya que no hay nada mejor en el mundo para mirar que los ricos. Para reanimarlos, se los eleva, a los ricos, cada diez años, a un grado más de la Legión de Honor, como una teta vieja, y ya los tenemos ocupados durante otros diez años. Y listo. Mis clientes, en cambio, eran unos egoístas, pobres, materialistas encerrados en sus cochinos proyectos de retiro, mediante el esputo sangrante y positivo. El resto les daba por completo igual. Hasta las estaciones les daban igual. De las estaciones sólo sentían y querían saber lo relativo a la tos y la enfermedad, que en invierno, por ejemplo, te acatarras mucho más que en verano, pero que en primavera, en cambio, escupes sangre con facilidad y que durante los calores puedes llegar a perder tres kilos por semana… A veces los oía hablarse entre ellos, cuando creían que yo no estaba, mientras esperaban su turno. Contaban sobre mí horrores sin fin y mentiras como para quedarse turulato. Criticarme así debía de animarlos, infundirles qué sé yo qué valor misterioso, que necesitaban para ser cada vez más implacables, resistentes y malvados pero bien, para durar, para resistir. Hablar mal así, maldecir, menospreciar, amenazar, les sentaba bien, era como para pensarlo. Y, sin embargo, había hecho

todo lo posible, yo, para serles agradable, por todos los medios; estaba de su parte e intentaba serles útil, les daba mucho yoduro para hacerles escupir sus cochinos bacilos y todo ello sin conseguir nunca neutralizar su mala leche…

Se quedaban ahí delante de mí, sonrientes como criados, cuando les hacía preguntas, pero no me querían, en primer lugar porque los ayudaba, y también porque no era rico y recibir mis cuidados quería decir recibirlos gratis y eso nunca es halagador para un enfermo, ni siquiera para el que esta pendiente de conseguir una pensión. Por detrás no había, pues, perrerías que no hubiesen propagado sobre mí. Tampoco tenía auto yo, al contrario que la mayoría de los demás médicos de los alrededores, y era también como una invalidez, en su opinión, que fuese a pie. En cuanto los excitaban un poco, a mis enfermos, y los colegas no perdían ocasión de hacerlo, se vengaban, parecía, de toda mi amabilidad, de que fuera tan servicial, tan solícito. Todo eso es normal. El tiempo pasaba, de todos modos.

Una noche, cuando mi sala de espera estaba casi vacía, entró un sacerdote a hablar conmigo. Yo no lo conocía, a aquel cura, estuve a punto de ponerlo de patitas en la calle. No me gustaban los curas, tenía mis razones, sobre todo desde que me habían hecho la faena del embarque en San Tapeta. Pero aquél, en vano me esforzaba por reconocerlo, para darle un rapapolvo a ciencia cierta, la verdad es que no lo había visto nunca. Y, sin embargo, de noche debía de circular con frecuencia por Rancy, pues era de la vecindad. ¿Sería que me evitaba cuando salía? Lo pensé. En fin, debían de haberle avisado de que a mí no me gustaban los curas. Se notaba por el modo furtivo como inició el palique. Conque nunca nos habíamos tropezado en torno a los mismos enfermos. Servía en una iglesia de allí al lado, desde hacía veinte años, según me dijo. Fieles había a montones, pero no muchos que le pagaran. Pordiosero, más que nada, en una palabra. Eso nos aproximaba. La sotana que lo cubría me pareció un ropaje muy incómodo para deambular en el fango de las chabolas. Se lo comenté. Insistí incluso en la extravagante incomodidad de semejante atuendo.

«¡Se acostumbra uno!», me respondió.

La impertinencia de mi comentario no le quitó las ganas de mostrarse más amable aún. Evidentemente, venía a pedirme algo. Su voz apenas se elevaba sobre una monotonía confidencial, que se debía, así me imaginé al menos, a su profesión. Mientras hablaba, prudente y preliminar, yo intentaba imaginarme lo que debía de hacer, aquel cura, para ganarse sus calorías, montones de muecas y promesas, del estilo de las mías… Y después me lo imaginaba, para divertirme, desnudo ante su altar… Así es como hay que acostumbrarse a transponer desde el primer momento a los hombres que vienen a visitarte, los comprendes mucho más rápido después, disciernes al instante en cualquier personaje su realidad de enorme y ávido gusano. Es un buen truco de la imaginación. Su cochino prestigio se disipa, se evapora. Desnudo ante ti ya no es, en una palabra, sino una alforja petulante y jactanciosa que se afana farfullando, fútil, en un estilo o en otro. Nada resiste a esa prueba. Sabes a qué atenerte al instante. Ya sólo quedan las ideas y las ideas nunca dan miedo. Con ellas nada está perdido, todo se arregla. Mientras que a veces es difícil soportar el prestigio de un hombre vestido. Conserva la tira de pestes y misterios en la ropa.

Tenía dientes pésimos, el padre, podridos, ennegrecidos y rodeados de sarro verdusco, una piorrea alveolar curiosita, en una palabra. Iba yo a hablarle de su piorrea, pero estaba demasiado ocupado contándome cosas. No cesaban de rezumar, las cosas que me decía, contra sus raigones, a impulsos de una lengua todos cuyos movimientos espiaba yo. Lengua desollada, la suya, en numerosas zonas minúsculas de sus sanguinolentos bordes.

Yo tenía la costumbre, e incluso el placer, de esas observaciones íntimas y meticulosas. Cuando te detienes a observar, por ejemplo, el modo como se forman y profieren las palabras, no resisten nuestras frases al desastre de su baboso decorado. Es más complicado y más penoso que la defecación, nuestro esfuerzo mecánico de la conversación. Esa corola de carne abotargada, la boca, que se agita silbando, aspira y se debate, lanza toda clase de sonidos viscosos a través de la hedionda barrera de la caries dental, ¡qué castigo! Y, sin embargo, eso es lo que nos exhortan a transponer en ideal. Es difícil. Puesto que no somos sino recintos de tripas tibias y a medio pudrir, siempre tendremos dificultades con el sentimiento. Enamorarse no es nada, permanecer juntos es lo difícil. La basura, en cambio, no pretende durar ni crecer. En ese sentido, somos mucho más desgraciados que la mierda, ese empeño de perseverar en nuestro estado constituye la increíble tortura.

Está visto que no adoramos nada más divino que nuestro olor. Toda nuestra desgracia se debe a que debemos seguir siendo Jean, Pierre o Gastón, a toda costa, durante años y años. Este cuerpo nuestro, disfrazado de moléculas agitadas y triviales, se revela todo el tiempo contra esta farsa atroz del durar. Quieren ir a perderse, nuestras moléculas, ¡ricuras!, lo más rápido posible, en el universo. Sufren por ser sólo «nosotros», cornudos del infinito. Estallaríamos, si tuviéramos valor; no hacemos sino flaquear día tras día. Nuestra tortura querida está encerrada ahí, atómica, en nuestra propia piel, con nuestro orgullo.

Como yo callaba, consternado por la evocación de esas ignominias biológicas, el padre creyó tenerme en el bote y aprovechó incluso para mostrarse de lo más condescendiente y familiar conmigo. Evidentemente, se había informado sobre mí por adelantado. Con infinitas precauciones, abordó el vidrioso tema de mi reputación médica en la vecindad. Habría podido ser mejor, me dio a entender, mi reputación, si hubiera actuado de modo muy distinto al instalarme y ello desde los primeros momentos de mi ejercicio en Rancy. «Los enfermos, querido doctor, no lo olvidemos nunca, son en principio conservadores… Temen, como es fácil de comprender, que lleguen a faltarles la tierra y el cielo…»

Según él, yo debería, pues, haberme aproximado desde el principio a la Iglesia. Tal era su conclusión de orden espiritual y práctico también. No era mala idea. Yo me guardaba bien de interrumpirlo, pero esperaba con paciencia que fuera al grano respecto a los motivos de su visita.

Para un tiempo triste y confidencial no se podía pedir nada mejor que el que hacía fuera. Era tan feo el tiempo, y de modo tan frío, tan insistente, como para pensar que ya no volveríamos a ver nunca el resto del mundo al salir, que se habría deshecho, el mundo, asqueado.

Mi enfermera había logrado, por fin, rellenar sus fichas, todas sus fichas, hasta la última. Ya no tenía excusa alguna para quedarse allí escuchándonos. Conque se marchó, pero muy molesta, dando un portazo tras sí, a través de una furiosa bocanada de lluvia.

Durante la conversación, aquel cura dio su nombre, padre Protiste se llamaba. Me comunicó, de reticencias en reticencias, que hacía ya un tiempo que realizaba gestiones junto con Henrouille hija con vistas a colocar a la vieja y a Robinson, los dos juntos, en una comunidad religiosa, una barata. Aún estaban buscando.

Mirándolo bien, habría podido pasar, el padre Protiste, por un empleado de comercio, como los demás, tal vez incluso por un jefe de departamento, mojado, verdoso y resecado cien veces. Era plebeyo de verdad por la humildad de sus insinuaciones. Por el aliento también. Yo no me equivocaba casi nunca con los alientos. Era un hombre que comía demasiado de prisa y bebía vino blanco.

Henrouille nuera, me contó, para empezar, había ido a verlo al presbiterio, poco después del atentado, para que los sacara del tremendo apuro en que acababan de meterse. A mí me parecía, mientras contaba eso, que buscaba excusas, explicaciones, parecía como avergonzarse de aquella colaboración. No valía la pena, la verdad, que se andara con remilgos por mí. Comprende uno las cosas. Había venido a vernos de noche. Y se acabó. ¡Peor para él, además! Una como cochina audacia se había apoderado de él también, poco a poco, con el dinero. ¡Allá él! Como todo mi dispensario estaba en completo silencio y la noche caía sobre las chabolas, bajó entonces la voz del todo para hacerme sus confidencias sólo a mí. Pero, de todos modos, en vano susurraba, todo lo que me contaba me parecía, pese a todo, inmenso, insoportable, por la calma, seguramente, que nos rodeaba, como llena de ecos. ¿Acaso dentro de mí sólo? ¡Chsss!, me daban ganas de apuntarle todo el tiempo, en el intervalo entre las palabras que pronunciaba. De miedo me temblaban un poco los labios incluso y al final de las frases dejaba de pensar.

Ahora que se había unido a nuestra angustia, ya no sabía demasiado cómo hacer, el cura, para avanzar detrás de nosotros cuatro en la negrura. Una pequeña pandilla. ¿Quería saber cuántos éramos ya en la aventura? ¿Adonde íbamos? Para poder, también él, coger la mano de los nuevos amigos hacia ese final que tendríamos que alcanzar todos juntos o nunca. Ahora éramos del mismo viaje. Aprendía a andar en la noche, el cura, como nosotros, como los otros. Tropezaba aún. Me preguntaba qué debía hacer para no caer. ¡Que no viniera, si tenía miedo! Llegaríamos al final juntos y entonces sabríamos lo que habíamos ido a buscar en la aventura. La vida es eso, un cabo de luz que acaba en la noche.

Y, además, puede que no lo supiéramos nunca, que no encontrásemos nada. Eso es la muerte.

La cuestión de momento era avanzar bien a tientas. Por lo demás, desde el punto al que habíamos llegado ya no podíamos retroceder. No había opción. Su cochina justicia con sus leyes estaba por todos lados, en la esquina de cada corredor. Henrouille hija llevaba de la mano a la vieja y su hijo y yo a ellas y a Robinson también. Estábamos juntos. Exacto. Le expliqué todo eso en seguida al cura. Y comprendió.

Quisiéramos o no, en el punto en que nos encontrábamos ahora, no habría sido plato de gusto que nos hubieran sorprendido y descubierto los transeúntes, le dije también al cura, e insistí mucho en eso. Si nos encontrábamos con alguien, tendríamos que aparentar que íbamos de paseo, como si tal cosa. Ésa era la consigna. Conservar la naturalidad. Así, pues, el cura ahora sabía todo, comprendía todo. Me estrechaba la mano con fuerza, a su vez. Tenía mucho miedo, como es lógico, él también. Los comienzos. Vacilaba, farfullaba incluso como un inocente. Ya no había camino ni luz en el punto en que nos encontrábamos, sólo prudencia en su lugar y que nos pasábamos de unos a otros y en la que no creíamos demasiado tampoco. Nada recoge las palabras que se dicen en esos casos para tranquilizarse. El eco no devuelve nada, has salido de la Sociedad. El miedo no dice ni sí ni no. Recoge todo lo que se dice, el miedo, todo lo que se piensa, todo.

Ni siquiera sirve en esos casos desorbitar los ojos en la obscuridad. Es horror inútil y se acabó. Se ha apoderado de todo, la noche, y hasta de las miradas. Te deja vacío. Hay que cogerse de la mano, de todos modos, para no caer. La gente de la luz ya no te comprende. Estás separado de ella por todo el miedo y permaneces aplastado por él hasta el momento en que la cosa acaba de un modo o de otro y entonces puedes reunirte por fin con esos cabrones de todo un mundo en la muerte o en la vida.

Lo que tenía que hacer el padre de momento era ayudarnos y espabilarse para aprender, era su currelo. Y, además, que había venido, sólo para eso, ocuparse de la colocación de la tía Henrouille, para empezar, y a escape, y de Robinson también, al tiempo, en donde las hermanitas de provincias. Le parecía posible, y a mí también, por cierto, ese arreglo. Sólo, que habría que esperar meses para una vacante y nosotros no podíamos esperar más. Hartos estábamos.

La nuera tenía toda la razón: cuanto antes, mejor. ¡Que se fueran! ¡Que nos viésemos libres de ellos! Conque Protiste estaba probando otro arreglo. Parecía, reconocí al instante, de lo más ingenioso. Y, además, que entrañaba una comisión para los dos, para el cura y para mí. El arreglo tenía que decidirse sin tardanza y yo debía desempeñar mi modesto papel. El consistente en convencer a Robinson para que se marchara al Mediodía, aconsejarlo al respecto y de forma totalmente amistosa, por supuesto, pero apremiante, de todos

modos.

Al no conocer todos los entresijos del arreglo de que hablaba el cura, tal vez debería haberme reservado la opinión, haber exigido garantías para mi amigo, por ejemplo… Pues, al fin y al cabo, era, pensándolo bien, un arreglo muy raro el que nos presentaba, el padre Protiste. Pero estábamos todos tan apremiados por las circunstancias, que lo esencial era no perder tiempo. Prometí todo lo que deseaban, mi apoyo y el secreto. Aquel Protiste parecía estar de lo más acostumbrado a las circunstancias delicadas de ese género y yo tenía la sensación de que me iba a facilitar mucho las cosas.

¿Por dónde empezar, ante todo? Había que organizar una marcha discreta para el Mediodía. ¿Qué pensaría, Robinson, del Mediodía? Y, además, la marcha con la vieja, a la que había estado a punto de asesinar… Yo insistiría… ¡Y listo!… No le quedaba más remedio que aceptar, y por toda clase de razones, no todas demasiado positivas, pero sólidas todas.

Para oficio raro, el que les habían buscado a Robinson y a la vieja en el Mediodía lo era y raro de verdad. En Toulouse erá. ¡Ciudad bonita, Toulouse! Por cierto, ¡que la íbamos a ver! ¡Íbamos a ir a verlos, allí! Quedamos en que yo iría a Toulouse, en cuanto estuvieran instalados, en su casa y en su currelo y todo.

Y después, pensándolo bien, me fastidiaba que se marchara tan pronto Robinson, allí, y al mismo tiempo me daba mucho gusto, sobre todo porque por una vez me ganaba un beneficio curiosito y de verdad. Me iban a dar mil francos. Así estaba convenido también. Lo único que tenía que hacer era convencer a Robinson para que se fuese al Mediodía, asegurándole que no había clima mejor para las heridas de sus ojos, que allí estaría la mar de bien y que, en una palabra, tenía una potra que para qué de salir tan bien librado. Era el modo de decidirlo.

Tras cinco minutos de reflexionar así, ya estaba yo del todo convencido y preparado para una entrevista decisiva. A hierro caliente, batir de repente, ésa es mi opinión. Al fin y al cabo, no iba a estar peor allí que aquí. La idea que había tenido aquel Protiste parecía, pensándolo bien, muy razonable, la verdad. Esos curas saben, qué caramba, apagar los peores escándalos.

Un comercio tan decente como cualquier otro, eso era lo que les ofrecían a Robinson y a la vieja en definitiva. Una especie de sótano con momias era, si no había entendido yo mal. Dejaban visitarlo, el sótano bajo una iglesia, a cambio de un óbolo. Turistas. Y todo un negocio, me aseguraba Protiste. Ya estaba yo casi convencido y al instante un poco envidioso. No se presenta todos los días la oportunidad de hacer trabajar a los muertos.

Cerré el dispensario y nos dirigimos a casa de los Henrouille, bien decididos, el cura y yo, por entre los charcos. Era una novedad, pero lo que se dice una novedad. ¡Mil francos de esperanza! Yo había cambiado de opinión sobre el cura. Al llegar al hotelito, encontramos a los esposos Henrouille junto a Robinson, en la alcoba del primer piso. Pero, ¡en qué estado, Robinson!

«¡Ya estás aquí! – fue y me dijo con el alma en vilo, en cuanto me oyó subir-. ¡Siento que va a pasar algo!… ¿Es verdad?», me preguntó jadeando.

Y ya lo teníamos otra vez lloriqueando antes de que yo hubiese podido decir una palabra siquiera. Los otros, los Henrouille, me hacían señas, mientras Robinson pedía socorro: «¡Menudo lío! – me dije-. ¡Qué prisas tienen ésos!… ¡Siempre con excesivas prisas! ¿Habrán levantado la liebre así, en frío?… ¿Sin preparación? ¿Sin esperarme?…»

Por fortuna, pude presentar de nuevo, por así decir, el asunto con otras palabras. No pedía otra cosa tampoco Robinson, un nuevo aspecto de las mismas cosas. Eso bastaba. El cura seguía en el pasillo, no se atrevía a entrar en la habitación. Iba y venía, sin parar, de canguelo.

«¡Entre! – le invitó, sin embargo, la hija, al final-. ¡Entre, hombre! ¡No molesta usted ni mucho menos, padre! Sorprende usted a una pobre familia en plena desgracia, ¡nada más!… ¡El médico y el cura! ¿Acaso no es así siempre en los momentos dolorosos de la vida?»

Se ponía a hacer frases grandilocuentes. Las nuevas esperanzas de salir del tomate y de la noche eran las que la volvían lírica, a aquella puta, a su cochina manera.

El desamparado cura había perdido todos sus recursos y se puso a farfullar de nuevo, al tiempo que permanecía a cierta distancia del enfermo. Su emocionado farfulleo se le pegó a Robinson, quien volvió a entrar en trance: «¡Me engañan! ¡Me engañan todos!», gritaba.

Cháchara, vamos, y, además, sobre simples apariencias. Emociones. Siempre lo mismo. Pero eso me reanimó a mí, me devolvió la cara dura. Me llevé a Henrouille hija a un rincón y le puse francamente las cartas boca arriba, porque veía que el único hombre allí capaz de sacarlos del apuro ira de nuevo mi menda, a fin de cuentas. «¡Un anticipo! – fui y le dije a la hija-. Y ahora mismo, ¡mi anticipo!» Cuando ya se ha perdido la confianza, no hay razón para andarse con rodeos, como se suele decir. Comprendió y me puso un billete de mil francos en toda la mano y otro más para mayor seguridad. Me había impuesto con autoridad. Entonces me puse a convencerlo, a Robinson, ya que estaba. Tenía que resignarse a marchar al Mediodía.

Traicionar, se dice pronto. Pero es que hay que aprovechar la ocasión. Es como abrir una ventana en una cárcel, traicionar. Todo el mundo lo desea, pero es raro que se consiga.

Una vez que Robinson se hubo marchado de Rancy, estuve convencido de que la vida iba a cambiar, de que tendría, por ejemplo, unos pocos más enfermos que de costumbre, y resulta que no. Primero, sobrevino el paro, la crisis, en la vecindad y eso es lo peor. Y, además, el tiempo se volvió, pese al invierno, suave y seco, mientras que el húmedo y frío es el que necesitamos para la medicina. Epidemias tampoco; en fin, una

estación contraria, un buen fracaso.

Vi incluso a colegas que iban a hacer sus visitas a pie, con eso está dicho todo, divertidos en apariencia con el paseo, pero muy molestos, en realidad, y sólo por no sacar los autos, por economía. Por mi parte, yo sólo tenía un impermeable para salir. ¿Sería por eso por lo que pesqué un catarro tan tenaz? ¿O era que me había acostumbrado de verdad a comer demasiado poco? Todo era posible. ¿Sería que me habían vuelto las fiebres? En fin, el caso es que, por haber cogido un poco de frío, justo antes de la primavera, me puse a toser sin parar, más enfermo que la leche. Un desastre. Una mañana me resultó del todo imposible levantarme. Justo entonces pasaba por delante de mi puerta la tía de Bébert. La mandé llamar. Subió. La envié al instante a cobrar una pequeña cantidad que aún me debían en el barrio. La única, la última. Esa suma recuperada a medias me duró diez días, en cama.

Se tiene tiempo de pensar, durante diez días tumbado.

En cuanto me encontrara mejor, me iría de Rancy, eso era lo que había decidido. Dos mensualidades atrasadas ya, por cierto… ¡Adiós, pues, a mis cuatro muebles! Sin decir nada a nadie, por supuesto, me largaría, a hurtadillas, y no me volverían a ver nunca en La Garenne-Rancy. Me marcharía sin dejar rastro ni dirección. Cuando te acosa la fiera hedionda de la miseria, ¿para qué discutir? Un tunela no dice nada y se da el piro.

Con mi título podía establecerme en cualquier parte, cierto… Pero no iba a ser ni más agradable ni peor… Un poco mejor, el sitio, al comienzo, lógicamente, porque siempre hace falta un poco de tiempo para que la gente llegue a conocerte y para que se ponga manos a la obra y encuentre el truco con el que hacerte daño. Mientras aún te buscan el punto más flaco, disfrutas de un poco de tranquilidad, pero, en cuanto lo han encontrado, vuelve a ser la misma historia de siempre, como en todas partes. En una palabra, el corto período durante el que eres desconocido en cada sitio nuevo es el más agradable. Después, vuelta a empezar con la misma mala leche. Son así. Lo importante es no esperar demasiado a que te hayan descubierto, pero bien, la debilidad, los gachos. Hay que aplastar las chinches antes de que se hayan metido en sus agujeros, ¿no?

En cuanto a los enfermos, los clientes, no me hacía ilusiones al respecto… No iban a ser en otro barrio ni menos rapaces, ni menos burros, ni menos cobardes que los de aquí. La misma priva, el mismo cine, los mismos chismes deportivos, la misma sumisión entusiasta a las necesidades naturales, de jalar y quilar, los convertirían, allá como aquí, en la misma horda embrutecida, cateta, titubeante de una trola a otra, farolera siempre, chapucera, mal intencionada, agresiva entre dos pánicos.

Pero, ya que el enfermo, por su parte, no deja de cambiar de costado en su cama, en la vida tenemos también derecho a pasar de un flanco a otro, es lo único que podemos hacer y la única defensa que hemos descubierto contra el propio Destino. Hay que abandonar la esperanza de dejar la pena en algún sitio por el camino. Es como una mujer horrorosa, la pena, y con la que te hubieras casado. ¿No será mejor tal vez acabar amándola un poco que agotarse azotándola toda la vida, puesto que no te la puedes cargar?

El caso es que me largué a hurtadillas de mi entresuelo de Rancy. Estaban en corro en torno al vino de mesa y las castañas, la portera y compañía, cuando pasé por delante de su chiscón por última vez. Ni visto ni oído. Ella se rascaba y él, inclinado sobre la estufa, abotargado por el calor, estaba ya tan bebido, que se le cerraban los ojos.

Para aquella gente, yo me colaba en lo desconocido como en un gran túnel sin fin. Da gusto, tres personas menos que te conocen y, por tanto, tres menos para espiarte y hacerte daño, que ni siquiera saben en absoluto qué ha sido de ti. ¡Qué bien! Tres, porque cuento también a su hija, su hija Thérése, que se hacía heridas hasta supurar de forúnculos, de tanto como le picaban pulgas y chinches. Es cierto que picaban tanto, en su casa, que, al entrar en su chiscón, tenías la sensación de penetrar poco a poco en un cepillo.

El largo dedo del gas en la entrada, crudo y silbante, se apoyaba sobre los transeúntes al borde de la acera y los convertía, de golpe, en fantasmas extraviados en el negro marco del portal. A continuación iban a buscarse un poco de calor, los transeúntes, aquí y allá, delante de las otras ventanas y las farolas y al final se perdían como yo en la noche, negros y difusos.

Ni siquiera estabas obligado a reconocerlos, a los transeúntes. Y, sin embargo, me habría gustado detenerlos en su vago deambular, un segundito, el tiempo justo para decirles, de una vez por todas, que me iba a perderme, al diablo, que me marchaba, pero tan lejos, que ya podían darles por culo y que ya no podían hacerme nada, ni unos ni otros, intentar nada…

Al llegar al Boulevard de la Liberté, los camiones de legumbres subían temblando hacia París. Seguí su ruta. En una palabra, ya casi me había marchado del todo de Rancy. Hacía bastante fresco. Conque, para calentarme, di un pequeño rodeo hasta el chiscón de la tía de Bébert. Su lámpara era un puntito de luz al fondo del pasillo. «Para acabar -me dije- tengo que decirle "adiós" a la tía.»

Estaba en su silla, como de costumbre, entre los olores del chiscón, y la estufita calentando todo aquello y su vieja figura ahora siempre lista para llorar desde que Bébert había muerto y, además, en la pared, por encima de la caja de costura, una gran foto escolar de Bébert, con su delantal, una boina y la cruz. Era una «ampliación» conseguida con los cupones del café. La desperté.

«Hola, doctor -dijo sobresaltada. Aún recuerdo muy bien lo que me dijo-. ¡Tiene usted mala cara! – observó en seguida-. Siéntese… Yo tampoco me encuentro demasiado bien…»

«He salido a dar un paseo», respondí, para despistar.

«Es muy tarde -dijo- para dar un paseo, sobre todo si va usted hacia la Place Clichy… ¡A esta hora sopla un

viento muy frío por la avenida!»

Entonces se levantó y, tropezando por aquí y por allá, se puso a hacernos un ponche y a hablar en seguida de todo al mismo tiempo y de los Henrouille y de Bébert, como es lógico.

No había forma de impedirle hablar de Bébert y eso que le causaba pena y la hacía sufrir y, además, lo sabía. Yo la escuchaba sin interrumpirla en ningún momento, estaba como embotado. Ella intentaba recordarme todas las buenas cualidades que había tenido Bébert y las exponía con mucho esfuerzo, porque no había que olvidar ninguna de sus cualidades, y volvía a empezar y después, cuando me había contado todas las circunstancias de su cría con biberón, recordaba otra cualidad más de Bébert que había que añadir a las demás, conque volvía a empezar la historia desde el principio y, sin embargo, se le olvidaban algunas, de todos modos, y al final no le quedaba más remedio que lloriquear un poco, de impotencia. Se equivocaba de cansancio. Se quedaba dormida sollozando. Ya no le quedaban fuerzas para sacar de la sombra el recuerdo del pequeño Bébert, al que tanto había querido. La nada estaba siempre cerca de ella y sobre ella ya un poco. Un poco de ponche y de fatiga y ya estaba, se dormía roncando como un avioncito lejano que se llevan las nubes. Ya no le quedaba nadie en la tierra.

Mientras estaba así, desplomada entre los olores, yo pensaba que me iba y que seguramente no volvería a verla nunca, a la tía de Bébert, que Bébert se había ido, por su parte, sin remilgos y para siempre, que también ella, la tía, se marcharía para seguirlo y dentro de poco tiempo. Para empezar, su corazón estaba enfermo y muy viejo. Bombeaba sangre como podía, su corazón, en sus arterias, le costaba subir por las venas. Se iría al gran cementerio de al lado, la tía, donde los muertos son como una multitud que espera. Allí era donde llevaba a jugar a Bébert, antes de que cayese enfermo, al cementerio. Y después de eso se habría acabado para siempre. Vendrían a pintar de nuevo su chiscón y se podría decir que nos habíamos reunido de nuevo todos, como las bolas del juego, que temblequean un poco al borde del agujero, que hacen remilgos antes de acabar de una vez.

Salen muy violentas y gruñonas, las bolas también, y no van nunca a ninguna parte, en definitiva. Nosotros tampoco y toda la tierra no sirve sino para eso, para hacer que nos reencontremos todos. Ya no le faltaba mucho, a la tía de Bébert, ahora, ya no le quedaba casi empuje. No podemos reencontrarnos mientras estamos en la vida. Hay demasiados colores que nos distraen y demasiada gente que se mueve alrededor. Sólo nos reencontramos en el silencio, cuando es demasiado tarde, como los muertos. Yo también tenía que moverme de nuevo y marcharme a otro sitio. De nada me servía hacer, saber… No podía quedarme allí con la tía.

Mi diploma en el bolsillo abultaba mucho, mucho más que el dinero y los documentos de identidad. Delante del puesto de policía, el agente de guardia esperaba el relevo de medianoche y escupía también de lo lindo. Nos dimos las buenas noches.

Después de la gasolinera, en la esquina del bulevar, venía la oficina de arbitrios y sus encargados, verdosos en su jaula de cristal. Los tranvías ya no circulaban. Era el mejor momento para hablarles de la vida, a los encargados, de la vida, cada vez más difícil, más cara. Eran dos allí, un joven y un viejo, con caspa los dos, inclinados sobre registros así de grandes. A través de su cristal, podían verse las grandes sombras de las fortificaciones del malecón, que se alzaban en la noche para esperar barcos procedentes de tan lejos, navíos tan nobles, que nunca se verán barcos así. Seguro. Los esperan.

Conque charlamos un rato, los encargados de arbitrios y yo, y hasta tomamos un cafelito que se calentaba en el cazo. Me preguntaron si me marchaba de vacaciones por casualidad, en broma, así, de noche, con mi paquetito en la mano. «Exacto», les respondí. Era inútil explicarles cosas poco comunes a los encargados de arbitrios. No podían ayudarme a comprender. Y un poco ofendido por su observación, me dieron ganas, de todos modos, de hacerme el interesante, de asombrarles, y me puse a hablar como un cohete, como si tal cosa, de la campaña de 1816, en la que los cosacos llegaron precisamente hasta el lugar en que nos encontrábamos, hasta el fielato, pisando los talones a Napoleón.

Evocado, todo ello, con desenvoltura, por supuesto. Tras haberlos convencido con pocas palabras, a aquellos dos sórdidos, de mi superioridad cultural, de mi espontánea erudición, cogí y me marché sosegado hacia la Place Clichy por la avenida que sube.

Habréis notado que siempre hay dos prostitutas esperando en la esquina de la Rué des Dames. Ocupan las pocas horas consumidas que separan la medianoche del amanecer. Gracias a ellas, la vida continúa a través de las sombras. Hacen de enlace con el bolso atestado de recetas, pañuelos para todo uso y fotos de hijos en el campo. Cuando te acercas a ellas en la sombra, has de tener cuidado, porque casi no existen, esas mujeres, de tan especializadas que están, vivas lo justo para responder a dos o tres frases que resumen todo lo que se puede hacer con ellas. Son espíritus de insectos dentro de botines con botones.

No hay que decirles nada, acercarse lo menos posible. Son malas. Me sobraba espacio. Eché a correr entre los raíles. La avenida es larga.

Al fondo se encuentra la estatua del mariscal Moncey. Sigue defendiendo la Place Clichy desde 1816 contra recuerdos y olvido, contra nada, con una corona de perlas baratas. Llegué yo también cerca de él corriendo con ciento doce años de retraso por la avenida tan vacía. Ni rusos ya, ni batallas, ni cosacos, ni soldados, nada que tomar ya en la plaza sino un reborde del pedestal bajo la corona. Y el fuego de un pequeño brasero con tres ateridos en torno a los que el apestoso fuego hacía bizquear. No daban ganas de quedarse.

Algunos autos escapaban a toda velocidad, mientras podían, hacia las salidas.

En casos de urgencia recuerdas los grandes bulevares como un lugar menos frío que otros. Mi cabeza ya

sólo funcionaba a fuerza de voluntad, por la fiebre. Sostenido por el ponche de la tía, bajé huyendo delante del viento, menos frío cuando lo recibes por detrás. Una anciana con gorrito, cerca del metro Saint-Georges, lloraba por la suerte de su nieta enferma en el hospital, de meningitis, según decía. Aprovechaba para pedir limosna. Conmigo iba dada.

Le ofrecí unas palabras. Le hablé también yo del pequeño Bébert y de otra niña que había tratado en la ciudad, siendo estudiante, y que había muerto, de meningitis también. Tres semanas había durado su agonía y su madre, en la cama de al lado, ya no podía dormir de pena, conque se masturbaba, su madre, todo el tiempo durante las tres semanas de agonía y hasta después, cuando todo hubo acabado, ya no había forma de detenerla.

Eso demuestra que no se puede existir sin placer, ni siquiera un segundo, y que es muy difícil tener pena de verdad. Así es la existencia.

Nos despedimos, la anciana apenada y yo, delante de las Galerías. Tenía que descargar zanahorias por Les Halles. Seguía el camino de las legumbres, como yo, el mismo.

Pero el Tarapout me atrajo. Está situado sobre el bulevar como un gran pastel de luz. Y la gente acude a él de todas partes y a toda prisa, como larvas. Sale de la noche circundante, la gente, con ojos desorbitados ya para ir a llenárselos de imágenes. Es que no cesa, el éxtasis. Son los mismos del metro de por la mañana. Pero ahí, delante del Tarapout, están contentos, como en Nueva York, se rascan el vientre delante de la caja, apoquinan un poco de dinero y ahí van al instante muy decididos y se precipitan alegres a los agujeros de la luz. Estábamos como desvestidos por la luz, de tanta como había sobre la gente, los movimientos, las cosas, guirnaldas y lámparas y más lámparas. No se habría podido hablar de un asunto personal en aquella entrada, era como todo lo contrario de la noche.

Muy aturdido yo también, me metí en una tasca vecina. En la mesa contigua a la mía, miré y me vi a Parapine, mi antiguo profesor, que estaba tomando un ponche con su caspa y todo. Nos encontramos. Nos alegramos. Se habían producido grandes cambios en su vida, según me dijo. Necesitó diez minutos para contármelos. No eran divertidos. El profesor Jaunisset en el Instituto se había vuelto tan duro con él, lo había perseguido tanto, que había tenido que irse, Parapine, dimitir y abandonar su laboratorio y luego también las madres de las colegialas habían ido, a su vez, a esperarlo a la puerta del Instituto y romperle la cara. Historias. Investigaciones. Angustias.

En el último momento, mediante un anuncio ambiguo en una revista médica, había podido aferrarse por los pelos a otro modesto medio de subsistencia. No gran cosa, evidentemente, pero, de todos modos, un apaño descansado y de su especialidad. Se trataba de la astuta aplicación de las teorías recientes del profesor Baryton sobre el desarrollo de niños cretinos mediante el cine. Un gran paso adelante en el subconsciente. No se hablaba de otra cosa en la ciudad. Era moderno.

Parapine acompañaba a sus clientes especiales al moderno Tarapout. Pasaba a recogerlos a la moderna casa de salud de Baryton, en las afueras, y luego los volvía a acompañar después del espectáculo, alelados, ahitos de visiones, felices y salvos y más modernos aún. Y listo. Nada más sentarse ante la pantalla, ya no había necesidad de ocuparse de ellos. Un público de oro. Todo el mundo contento, la misma película diez veces seguidas les encantaba. No tenían memoria. Sus familias, encantadas. Parapine también. Yo también. Nos reíamos de gusto y venga ponches y más ponches para celebrar aquella reconstitución material de Parapine en el plano de la modernidad. Decidimos no movernos de allí hasta las dos de la mañana, tras la última sesión del Tarapout, para ir a buscar a sus cretinos, reunidos y llevarlos a escape en auto a la casa del doctor Baryton en Vigny-sur-Seine. Un chollo.

Como estábamos contentos ambos de volvernos a ver, nos pusimos a hablar sólo por el placer de decirnos fantasías y en primer lugar sobre los viajes que habíamos hecho y después sobre Napoleón, que salió a relucir a propósito de Moncey, el de la Place Clichy. Todo se vuelve placer, cuando el único objetivo es estar bien juntos, porque entonces parece como si por fin fuéramos libres. Olvidas tu propia vida, es decir, las cosas del parné.

Burla burlando, hasta sobre Napoleón se nos ocurrieron chistes que contar. Parapine se la conocía bien, la historia de Napoleón. Le había apasionado en tiempos, me contó, en Polonia, cuando aún estaba en el instituto de bachillerato. Había recibido buena educación, Parapine, no como yo.

Así, me contó, al respecto, que, durante la retirada de Rusia, a los generales de Napoleón les había costado Dios y ayuda impedirle ir a Varsovia para que la polaca de su corazón le hiciese la última mamada suprema. Era así, Napoleón, hasta en plenos reveses e infortunios. No era serio, en una palabra. ¡Ni siquiera él, el águila de su Josefina! Más cachondo que una mona, la verdad, contra viento y marea. Por lo demás, no hay nada que hacer, mientras se conserve el gusto por el goce y el cachondeo y es un gusto que todos tenemos. Eso es lo más triste. ¡Sólo pensamos en eso! En la cuna, en el café, en el trono, en el retrete. ¡En todas partes! ¡En todas partes! ¡La pilila! ¡Napoleón o no! ¡Cornudo o no! Lo primero, ¡el placer! ¡Anda y que la diñen los cuatrocientos mil pobres diablos empantanados hasta el penacho!, se decía el gran vencido, ¡con tal de que Napoleón eche otro polvo! ¡Qué cabrón! ¡Y hale! ¡La vida misma! ¡Así acaba todo! ¡No es serio! El tirano siente hastío de la obra que representa mucho antes que los espectadores. Se va a follar, cuando está harto de segregar delirios para el público. Entonces, ¡va de ala! ¡El Destino lo deja caer en menos que canta un gallo! ¡No son las matanzas a base de bien lo que le reprochan los entusiastas! ¡Qué va! ¡Eso no es nada! ¡Vaya si se las perdonarían! Sino que se volviera aburrido de repente, eso es lo que no le perdonan. Lo serio sólo se tolera

cuando es un camelo. Las epidemias no cesan hasta el momento en que los microbios sienten asco de sus toxinas. A Robespierre lo guillotinaron porque siempre repetía la misma cosa y Napoleón, por su parte, no resistió a más de diez años de una inflación de Legión de Honor. La tortura de ese loco fue verse obligado a inspirar deseos de aventuras a la mitad de la Europa sentada. Oficio imposible. Lo llevó a la tumba.

Mientras que el cine, nuevo y modesto asalariado de nuestros sueños, podemos comprarlo, en cambio, procurárnoslo por una hora o dos, como una prostituta.

Y, además, en nuestros días, se ha distribuido a artistas por todos lados, por precaución, en vista de tanto aburrimiento. Hasta en los burdeles te los encuentras, a los artistas, con sus escalofríos desmadrándose por todos lados y sus sinceridades chorreando por los pisos. Hacen vibrar las puertas. A ver quién se estremece más y con más descaro, más ternura, y se abandona con mayor intensidad que el vecino. Hoy igual de bien decoran los retretes que los mataderos y el Monte de Piedad también, todo para divertirnos, para distraernos, hacernos salir de nuestro Destino.

Vivir por vivir, ¡qué trena! La vida es una clase cuyo celador es el aburrimiento; está ahí todo el tiempo espiándote; por lo demás, hay que aparentar estar ocupado, a toda costa, con algo apasionante; si no, llega y se te jala el cerebro. Un día que sólo sea una jornada de 24 horas no es tolerable. Ha de ser por fuerza un largo placer casi insoportable, una jornada; un largo coito, una jornada, de grado o por fuerza.

Se te ocurren así ideas repulsivas, estando aturdido por la necesidad, cuando en cada uno de tus segundos se estrella un deseo de mil otras cosas y lugares.

Robinson era un tío preocupado por el infinito también, en su género, antes de que le ocurriese el accidente, pero ahora ya había recibido para el pelo bien. Al menos, eso creía yo.

Aproveché que estábamos en el café, tranquilos, para contar, yo también, a Parapine todo lo que me había ocurrido desde nuestra separación. Él comprendía las cosas, e incluso las mías, y le confesé que acababa de arruinar mi carrera médica al abandonar Rancy de modo insólito. Así hay que decirlo. Y no era cosa de broma. No había ni que pensar en volver a Rancy, en vista de las circunstancias. Así le parecía también a él.

Mientras conversábamos con gusto así, nos confesábamos, en una palabra, se produjo el entreacto del Tarapout y llegaron en masa a la tasca los músicos del cine. Tomamos una copa a coro. Parapine era muy conocido de los músicos.

Burla burlando, me enteré por ellos de que precisamente buscaban un «pachá» para la comparsa del intermedio. Un papel mudo. Se había marchado, el que hacía de «pachá», sin avisar. Un papel bonito y bien pagado, además, en un preludio. Sin esfuerzo. Y, además, no hay que olvidarlo, con la picarona compañía de una magnífica bandada de bailarinas inglesas, miles de músculos agitados y precisos. Mi estilo y necesidad exactamente.

Me hice el simpático y esperé las propuestas del director. En una palabra, me presenté. Como era tan tarde y no tenían tiempo de ir a buscar a otro figurante hasta la Porte Saint-Martin, el director se alegró mucho de tenerme a mano. Le evitaba engorros. A mí también. Casi ni me examinó. Conque me aceptó sin más pegas. Me contrataron. Con tal de que no cojeara, valía y aún…

Penetré en los bellos sótanos, cálidos y acolchados, del cine Tarapout. Una auténtica colmena de camerinos perfumados, donde las inglesas, en espera del espectáculo, descansaban diciendo tacos y haciendo cabalgatas ambiguas. Exultante por tener de nuevo forma de ganarme las habichuelas, me apresuré a entrar en relaciones con aquellas compañeras jóvenes y desenvueltas. Por cierto, que me hicieron los honores de grupo con la mayor amabilidad del mundo. Ángeles. Ángeles discretos. Da gusto no sentirse ni confesado ni despreciado, así es en Inglaterra.

Substanciosas recaudaciones, las del Tarapout. Hasta entre bastidores todo era lujo, comodidad, muslos, luces, jabones, mediasnoches. El tema del intermedio en que aparecíamos se situaba, creo, en el Turquestán. Era un pretexto para pamplinas coreográficas, contoneos musicales y violentos tamborileos.

Mi papel, breve pero esencial. Al principio, hinchado de oro y plata, experimenté cierta dificultad para instalarme entre tantos bastidores y lámparas inestables, pero me acostumbré y, una vez en el sitio, graciosamente realzado, ya sólo me quedaba dejarme llevar por mis sueños bajo los focos opalinos.

Durante un buen cuarto de hora, veinte bayaderas londinenses se meneaban en melodías y bacanales impetuosas para convencerme, al parecer, de la realidad de sus atractivos. Yo no pedía tanto y pensaba que repetir cinco veces al día aquella actuación era mucho para mujeres, y, además, sin flaquear, nunca, una vez tras otra, contoneando implacables el trasero con esa energía de raza un poco aburrida, esa continuidad intransigente de los barcos en ruta, las estraves, en su infinito trajinar por los océanos…

No vale la pena debatirse, esperar basta, ya que todo acabará pasando por la calle. Ella sola cuenta, en el fondo. No hay nada que decir. Nos espera. Habrá que bajar a la calle, decidirse, no uno, ni dos, ni tres de nosotros, sino todos. Estamos ahí delante, haciendo remilgos y melindres, pero ya llegará.

En las casas, nada bueno. En cuanto una puerta se cierra tras un hombre, empieza a oler en seguida y todo lo que lleva huele también. Pasa de moda en el sitio, en cuerpo y alma. Se pudre. Si apestan, los hombres, nos está bien empleado. ¡Debíamos ocuparnos de ello! Debíamos sacarlos, expulsarlos, exponerlos. Todo lo que apesta está en la habitación y adornado, pero hediondo, de todos modos.

Hablando de familias, conozco a un farmacéutico, en la Avenue de Saint-Ouen, que tiene un hermoso rótulo en el escaparate, un bonito anuncio: ¡tres francos la caja para purgar a toda la familia! ¡Un chollo! ¡Eructan! Obran juntos, en familia. Se odian con avaricia, en un hogar de verdad, pero nadie protesta, porque,

de todos modos, es menos caro que ir a vivir a un hotel.

El hotel, ya que hablamos, es más inquieto, no tiene las pretensiones de un piso, te sientes menos culpable en él. La raza humana nunca está tranquila y para descender al juicio final, que se celebrará en la calle, evidentemente estás más cerca en el hotel. Ya pueden venir, los ángeles con trompetas, que estaremos los primeros, nosotros, nada más bajar del hotel.

Intentas no llamar la atención demasiado, en el hotel. No sirve de nada. Ya sólo con gritar un poco fuerte o demasiado a menudo, mal asunto, te fichan. Al final, apenas te atreves a mear en el lavabo, pues todo se oye de una habitación a otra. Acabas adquiriendo por fuerza los buenos modales, como los oficiales en la marina de guerra. Todo puede ponerse a temblar de la tierra al cielo de un momento a otro, estamos listos, nos la suda, puesto que nos «perdonamos» ya diez veces al día tan sólo al encontrarnos en los pasillos, en el hotel.

Hay que aprender a reconocer, en los retretes, el olor de cada uno de los vecinos de la planta, es cómodo. Resulta difícil hacerse ilusiones en una pensión. Los clientes no son chulitos. A hurtadillas viajan por la vida un día tras otro sin llamar la atención, en el hotel, como en un barco que estuviera un poco podrido y lleno de agujeros y lo supiesen.

Aquel al que fui a alojarme atraía sobre todo a los estudiantes de provincias. Olía a colillas viejas y desayunos, desde los primeros escalones. Lo reconocías desde lejos, de noche, por la luz grisácea que tenía encima de la puerta y las letras melladas, de oro, que le colgaban del balcón como una enorme dentadura vieja. Un monstruo de alojamiento abotargado de apaños miserables.

De unas habitaciones a otras nos visitábamos por el pasillo. Tras años de empresas miserables en la vida práctica, aventuras, como se suele decir, volvía yo con los estudiantes.

Sus deseos eran siempre los mismos, sólidos y rancios, ni más ni menos insípidos que en la época en que me había separado de ellos. Los individuos habían cambiado, pero las ideas no. Seguían yendo, como siempre, unos y otros, a apacentarse más o menos con medicina, retazos de química, comprimidos de derecho y zoologías enteras, a horas más o menos regulares, en el otro extremo del barrio. La guerra, al pasar por su quinta, no había transformado nada en ellos y, cuando te metías en sus sueños, por simpatía, te llevaban derecho a sus cuarenta años. Se daban así veinte años por delante, doscientos cuarenta meses de economías tenaces, para fabricarse una felicidad.

Era un cromo, la imagen que tenían de la felicidad como del éxito, pero bien graduado, esmerado. Se veían en el último peldaño, rodeados de una familia poco numerosa pero incomparable y preciosa hasta el delirio. Y, sin embargo, nunca habrían echado, por así decir, un vistazo a su familia. No valía la pena. Está hecha para todo, menos para ser contemplada, la familia. Ante todo, la fuerza del padre, su felicidad, consiste en besar a su familia sin mirarla nunca, su poesía.

La novedad sería ir a Niza en automóvil con la esposa, provista de dote, y tal vez adoptar los cheques para las transferencias bancarias. Para las partes vergonzosas del alma, seguramente llevar también a la esposa una noche al picadero. No más. El resto del mundo se encuentra encerrado en los periódicos y custodiado por la policía.

La estancia en el hotel de las pulgas los avergonzaba un poco de momento y los volvía fácilmente irritables, a mis compañeros. El jovencito burgués en el hotel, el estudiante, se siente en penitencia y, como aún no puede, naturalmente, ahorrar, reclama bohemia para aturdirse y más bohemia, desesperación con café y leche.

Hacia primeros de mes pasábamos por una breve y auténtica crisis de erotismo, todo el hotel vibraba. Nos lavábamos los pies. Organizábamos una expedición amorosa. La llegada de los giros de provincias nos decidía. Yo, por mi parte, habría podido obtener los mismos coitos en el Tarapout con mis inglesas del baile y, además, gratis, pero pensándolo bien, renuncié a esa facilidad por evitar líos y por los amigos, chulos desgraciados y celosos, que andan siempre entre bastidores tras las bailarinas.

Como leíamos muchas revistas obscenas en nuestro hotel, ¡conocíamos la tira de trucos y direcciones para follar en París! Hay que reconocer que las direcciones son divertidas. Te dejas llevar; incluso a mí, que había vivido en el Passage des Bérésinas y había viajado y conocido muchas complicaciones de la vida indecente, el capítulo de las confidencias nunca me parecía del todo agotado. Subsiste en uno siempre un poquito de curiosidad de reserva para la cuestión de la jodienda. Te dices que ya no vas a aprender nada nuevo, sobre la jodienda, que ya no debes perder ni un minuto con ella, y después vuelves a empezar, sin embargo, otra vez sólo para cerciorarte de verdad de que es algo vacío y aprendes, de todos modos, algo nuevo al respecto y eso te basta para recuperar el optimismo.

Te recuperas, piensas con mayor claridad que antes, cobras nuevas esperanzas, cuando precisamente ya no te quedaba la menor esperanza, y vuelves fatalmente a la jodienda por el mismo precio. En una palabra, siempre hay cosas que descubrir en una vagina para todas las edades. Bueno, pues, una tarde, voy a contar lo que pasó, salimos tres huéspedes del hotel en busca de una aventura barata. Era fácil gracias a las relaciones de Pomone, que tenía una agencia con todo lo que se puede desear en materia de ajustes y compromisos eróticos, en su barrio de Batignoles. Su registro abundaba en invitaciones de diversos precios, funcionaba, aquel hombre providencial, sin fasto alguno, en el fondo de un pequeño patio de una casa modesta, tan poco alumbrada, que para guiarte necesitabas tanto tacto y consideración como en un urinario desconocido. Varias colgaduras que habías de apartar te inquietaban antes de llegar hasta aquel proxeneta, sentado siempre en una penumbra para confidencias.

Por culpa de aquella penumbra, nunca pude, a decir verdad, observar cómodamente a Pomone y, pese a haber tenido largas conversaciones juntos, a haber colaborado incluso durante un tiempo y a haberme hecho toda clase de proposiciones y toda clase de otras confidencias peligrosas, me resultaría imposible reconocerlo hoy, si me lo encontrara en el infierno.

Recuerdo sólo que los aficionados furtivos que esperaban su turno en el salón se mantenían siempre muy circunspectos, ninguna familiaridad entre ellos, hay que reconocerlo, la reserva en persona, como en la consulta de un dentista al que no le gustara nada el ruido ni la luz.

Fue gracias a un estudiante de medicina como conocí a Pomone. Frecuentaba la casa, el estudiante, para ganarse un complemento, gracias a que tenía, el muy potrudo, un pene formidable. Lo llamaban, al estudiante, para animar con su estupendo chuzo veladas muy íntimas, en las afueras. Sobre todo las damas, las que no creían que se pudiera tener «uno así de gordo», lo festejaban. Divagaciones de chiquillas aventajadas. En los registros de la policía figuraba, nuestro estudiante, con un seudónimo terrible: ¡Baltasar!

Los clientes que esperaban difícilmente trababan conversación. El dolor se exhibe, mientras que el placer y la necesidad dan vergüenza.

Es pecado, quieras que no, ser putero y pobre. Cuando Pomone se enteró de mi estado actual y de mi pasado médico, abandonó su reserva y me confió su tormento. Un vicio lo agotaba. Lo había contraído «tocándose» de continuo bajo su mesa durante las conversaciones que sostenía con sus clientes, investigadores, obsesionados del perineo. «Es mi oficio, ¡compréndalo! No es fácil abstenerse… ¡Con todo lo que vienen a contarme, esos cabrones!…» En una palabra, la clientela lo arrastraba a los abusos, como esos carniceros demasiado gruesos que siempre tienen tendencia a atiborrarse de carnes. Además, estoy convencido de que tenía el bajo vientre permanentemente recalentado por una traidora fiebre que le venía de los pulmones. Por cierto, que unos años después la tuberculosis se lo llevó al otro mundo. La cháchara infinita de las clientas presuntuosas lo agotaba también en otro sentido, siempre tramposas, creadoras de montones de líos y alborotos por nada y por sus chichis, que, según ellas, no tenían igual en las cuatro partes del mundo.

A los hombres había que presentarles sobre todo admiradoras que tragaran para sus caprichos apasionados. Tantos como los de la Sra. Herote. En un solo correo matinal de la agencia Pomone llegaba bastante amor insatisfecho como para extinguir todas las guerras de este mundo. Pero es que esos diluvios sentimentales nunca trascienden la jodienda. Eso es lo malo.

Su mesa desaparecía bajo aquel revoltijo repulsivo de trivialidades ardientes. Con mi deseo de saber más, decidí interesarme durante un tiempo por la clasificación de ese tremendo tejemaneje epistolar. Se ordenaba, me explicó, por clases de afectos, como con las corbatas o las enfermedades, los delirios primero, por un lado, y después los masoquistas y los viciosos, por otro, los flagelantes por aquí, los de «estilo aya» en otra página y así con todos. No tardan demasiado en convertirse en cargas, las distracciones. ¡Nos expulsaron, pero bien, del Paraíso! ¡De eso no cabe duda! Pomone era de esa opinión también con sus manos húmedas y su vicio interminable, que le infligía a un tiempo placer y penitencia. Al cabo de unos meses me harté de él y de su comercio. Espacié mis visitas.

En el Tarapout seguían considerándome muy decente, muy tranquilo, figurante puntual, pero, tras unas semanas de calma, la desgracia me volvió por el conducto más inesperado y me vi obligado, también de repente, a abandonar la compañía para continuar mi puñetero camino. Considerados a distancia, aquellos tiempos del Tarapout no fueron, en resumen, sino una especie de escala prohibida y solapada. Siempre bien vestido, lo reconozco, durante aquellos cuatro meses, tan pronto de príncipe, dos veces de centurión, otro día aviador, y pagado generosa y regularmente. Comí en el Tarapout para años. Una vida de rentista sin las rentas. ¡Traición! ¡Desastre! Una noche, no sé por qué razón, cambiaron nuestro número. El nuevo preludio representaba los muelles de Londres. En seguida, me dio mala espina, nuestras inglesas tenían que cantar, desafinando y, en apariencia, a las orillas del Támesis, de noche, y yo hacía de *policeman,* papel del todo mudo, deambular de izquierda a derecha por delante del pretil. De pronto, cuando menos lo pensaba, su canción se volvió más fuerte que la vida y hasta dio un vuelco al destino y lo inclinó hacia la desgracia. Conque, mientras cantaban, yo ya no podía pensar en otra cosa que en toda la miseria del pobre mundo y en la mía, sobre todo, porque la canción de aquellas putas me repetía en el corazón, como el atún en el estómago. ¡Y eso que creía haberlo digerido, haber olvidado lo más duro! Pero lo peor de todo era que se trataba de una canción que quería ser alegre y no lo conseguía. Y se contoneaban, mis compañeras, al tiempo que cantaban, para que lo pareciese. Entonces sí que sí, la verdad, era como si pregonáramos la miseria, las angustias… ¡Exacto! ¡De paseo por la niebla con el alma en pena! Se deshacían en lamentos, envejecíamos por momentos con ellas. El decorado rezumaba también pánico con avaricia. Y, sin embargo, continuaban, las chatis. No parecían comprender los tremendos efectos de pena que sobre todos nosotros provocaba su canción… Se quejaban de toda su vida, moviendo el esqueleto, riendo, al compás… Cuando viene de tan lejos, con tal seguridad, no puedes equivocarte ni resistirte.

Estábamos rodeados de miseria, pese al lujo que había en la sala, sobre nosotros, sobre el decorado, desbordaba, chorreaba por toda la tierra, de todos modos. Eran artistas como la copa de un pino… Exhalaban pena, sin que quisiesen impedirlo ni comprenderlo siquiera. Sólo sus ojos eran tristes. No basta con los ojos. Cantaban el fracaso de la vida sin comprender. Seguían confundiéndolo con el amor, con puro y mero amor, no les habían enseñado el resto, a aquellas chavalitas. ¡Una penita cantaban, en apariencia! ¡Así lo llamaban! Todo parece penas de amor, cuando se es joven y no se sabe…

Where I go…where I look… It's only foryou… ou… Only foryou… ou…

Así cantaban.

Es la manía de los jóvenes de identificar toda la Humanidad con un chichi, uno solo, el sueño sagrado, la pasión de amor. Más adelante aprenderían tal vez, adonde iba a acabar todo eso, cuando ya no fueran rosas, cuando la miseria de verdad de su puñetero país las hubiera atrapado, a las dieciséis, con sus gruesos muslos de yegua, sus chuchái saltarines… Por lo demás, estaban ya de miseria hasta el cuello, hundidas, las ricuras, no se iban a librar. A las entrañas, a la garganta, se les aferraba ya, la miseria, por todas las cuerdas de sus voces finas y falsas también.

La llevaban dentro. No hay traje, ni lentejuelas, ni luz, ni sonrisas que valgan para engañarla, para despistarla, respecto a los suyos, los encuentra donde se escondan, los suyos; se divierte haciéndoles cantar simplemente, en espera de su turno, todas las tonterías de la esperanza. Eso la despierta, la mece y la excita, a la miseria.

Nuestra pena es así, la grande, una distracción.

Conque, ¡allá el que canta canciones de amor! El amor es ella, la miseria, y nada más que ella, ella siempre, que viene a mentir en nuestra boca, mierda pura, y se acabó. Está en todas partes, la muy puta, no hay que despertarla, la miseria propia, ni en broma. No entiende las bromas. Y, sin embargo, tres veces al día lo repetían, mis inglesas, delante del decorado y con melodías de acordeón. Por fuerza tenía que acabar muy mal.

Yo no me metía en nada, pero puedo asegurar que la vi venir, la catástrofe.

Primero, una de las chavalitas cayó enferma. ¡Muerte a las ricuras que provocan las desgracias! ¡Allá ellas y que la diñen! A propósito, tampoco hay que detenerse en las esquinas de las calles detrás de los acordeones, con frecuencia es ahí donde se pesca la enfermedad, el acceso de verdad. Conque vino una polaca para substituir a la que estaba enferma, en su cantinela. Tosía también, la polaca, en los entreactos. Una chica alta, fuerte y pálida era. En seguida nos hicimos confidencias. En dos horas conocí su alma entera, para el cuerpo esperé aún un poco. La manía de aquella polaca era mutilarse el sistema nervioso con amores imposibles. Como es lógico, había entrado en la puñetera canción de las inglesas como una seda, con su dolor y todo. Comenzaba con un tonillo simpático, su canción, como si nada, como todas las bailables, y después, mira por dónde, te encogía el corazón a fuerza de ponerte triste, como si, al oírla, fueses a perder las ganas de vivir, pues no podía ser más cierto que todo se acaba, juventud y demás, entonces te inclinabas, después de que se hubieran extinguido canción y melodía, para acostarte en la cama auténtica, la tuya, la de verdad de la buena, la del agujero para acabar de una vez. Dos estribillos y casi ansiabas irte al plácido país de la muerte, el país de la ternura eterna y el olvido instantáneo como una niebla. Eran voces de niebla, las suyas, en una palabra.

Coreábamos todos el lamento del reproche, contra los que andan aún por ahí, con la vida a cuestas, que esperan a lo largo de los muelles, de todos los muelles del mundo, a que acabe de pasar la vida, mientras se entretienen de cualquier modo, vendiendo cosas y naranjas a los otros fantasmas e informes y monedas falsas, policía, viciosos, penas, contando chismes, en esa bruma de paciencia que nunca acabará…

Tania se llamaba mi nueva amiga de Polonia. Su vida era febril de momento, lo comprendí, por un empleadillo de banca cuadragenario que conocía desde Berlín. Quería regresar, a su Berlín, y amarlo pese a todo y a cualquier precio. Para volver a verlo allí, habría hecho cualquier cosa.

Perseguía a los agentes teatrales, los que prometen contratos, hasta el fondo de sus escaleras apestosas. Le daban pellizcos en los muslos, los guarros, mientras esperaba respuestas que nunca llegaban. Pero apenas si notaba sus manipulaciones, de tan embargada que estaba por su amor lejano. No pasó una semana en tales condiciones sin que sucediera una catástrofe de aúpa. Había atiborrado el Destino de tentaciones desde hacía semanas y meses, como un cañón.

La gripe se llevó a su prodigioso amante. Nos enteramos de la desgracia un sábado por la noche. Nada más recibir la noticia, me arrastró, desmelenada, extraviada, al asalto de la Gare du Nord. Eso no era nada aún, pero con su delirio pretendía ante la taquilla llegar a tiempo a Berlín para el entierro. Fueron necesarios dos jefes de estación para disuadirla, hacerle comprender que era demasiado tarde.

En el estado en que se encontraba, yo no podía pensar en abandonarla. Por lo demás, se aferraba a su tragedia, quería a toda costa mostrármela en pleno trance. ¡Qué ocasión! Los amores contrariados por la miseria y la distancia son como los amores de marinero, son, digan lo que digan, irrefutables y logrados. En primer lugar, cuando no se tiene ocasión de verse con frecuencia, no se puede regañar y eso ya es una gran ventaja. Como la vida no es sino un delirio atestado de mentiras, cuanto más lejos estás más mentiras puedes añadir y más contento estás entonces, es lógico y normal. La verdad no hay quien la trague.

Por ejemplo, ahora es fácil contar cosas sobre Jesucristo. ¿Es que iba al retrete delante de todo el mundo, Jesucristo? Se me ocurre que no le habría durado demasiado el cuento, si hubiera hecho caca en público. Muy poca presencia, ésa es la cosa, sobre todo para el amor.

Una vez bien asegurados, Tania y yo, de que no había tren posible para Berlín, nos desquitamos con los telegramas. En la oficina de la Bolsa, redactamos uno muy largo, pero para enviarlo había otra dificultad, ya no sabíamos adonde enviarlo. No conocíamos a nadie en Berlín, salvo al muerto. A partir de aquel momento, sólo pudimos cambiar palabras sobre el deceso. Nos sirvieron, las palabras, para dar dos o tres veces más la vuelta a la Bolsa y después, como teníamos que adormecer el dolor, de todos modos, subimos despacio hacia Montmartre, al tiempo que farfullábamos pesares.

A partir de la Rué Lepic, empiezas a encontrar gente que va a buscar alegría a la parte alta de la ciudad. Se apresuran. Llegados al Sacré-Coeur, se ponen a mirar la noche, abajo, que forma un gran hueco con todas las casas amontonadas en el fondo.

En la placita, en el café que nos pareció, por las apariencias, el menos caro, entramos. Tania me dejaba, por el consuelo y el agradecimiento, besarla donde quisiera. Le gustaba mucho beber también. En las banquetas a nuestro alrededor, dormían ya juerguistas un poco borrachos.

El reloj de la pequeña iglesia se puso a dar las horas y después más horas hasta nunca acabar. Acabábamos de llegar al final del mundo, estaba cada vez más claro. No se podía ir más lejos, porque después de aquello ya sólo había los muertos.

Empezaban en la Place du Tertre, al lado, los muertos. Estábamos bien situados para localizarlos. Pasaban justo por encima de las Galeries Dufayel, al este, por consiguiente.

Pero, aun así, hay que saber encontrarlos, es decir, desde dentro y con los ojos casi cerrados, porque los grandes haces de luz de los anuncios molestan mucho, aun a través de las nubes, a la hora de divisarlos, a los muertos. Con ellos, los muertos, comprendí en seguida, habían admitido a Bébert, incluso nos hicimos una señita los dos, Bébert y yo, y también, no lejos de él, la chica tan pálida, abortada por fin, la de Rancy, bien vaciada esa vez de todas sus tripas.

Había la tira de otros antiguos clientes míos, por aquí, por allá, y clientas en las que ya no pensaba nunca, y otros más, el negro en una nube blanca, solo, al que habían azotado más de la cuenta, allá, lo reconocí, en Topo, y el tío Grappa, ¡el viejo teniente de la selva virgen! De ésos me había acordado de vez en cuando, del teniente, del negro torturado y también de mi español, el cura; había venido, el cura, con los muertos aquella noche para las oraciones del cielo y su cruz de oro le molestaba mucho para revolotear de un cielo a otro. Se aferraba con su cruz a las nubes, a las más sucias y amarillas, y fui reconociendo a muchos otros desaparecidos, muchos, muchos otros… Tan numerosos, que da vergüenza, la verdad, no haber tenido tiempo de mirarlos mientras viven ahí, a tu lado, durante años…

Nunca se tiene bastante tiempo, es cierto, ni siquiera para pensar en uno mismo.

En fin, ¡todos aquellos cabrones se habían vuelto ángeles sin que me hubiera dado cuenta! Ahora había la tira de nubes llenas de ángeles y extravagantes e indecentes, por todos lados. ¡De paseo por encima de la ciudad! Busqué a Molly entre ellos, era el momento, mi amable, mi única amiga, pero no había venido con ellos… Debía de tener un cielo para ella sólita, cerca de Dios, de tan buena que había sido siempre, Molly… Me dio gusto no encontrarla con aquellos golfos, porque eran sin duda unos muertos golfos aquellos, unos pillos, sólo la chusma y la pandilla de los fantasmas se habían reunido aquella noche por encima de la ciudad. Del cementerio de al lado, sobre todo, venían sin parar y nada distinguidos. Y eso que era un cementerio pequeño; comuneros, incluso, todos sangrando, que abrían la boca como para gritar aún y que ya no podían… Esperaban, los comuneros, con los otros, esperaban a La Perouse, el de las Islas, que los mandaba a todos aquella noche para la reunión… No acababa, La Perouse, de prepararse, por culpa de la pata de palo que se le torcía… y, además, que siempre le había costado ponérsela, la pata de palo, y también por culpa de sus grandes anteojos, que no aparecían.

No quería salir a las nubes sin llevar en torno al cuello sus anteojos; una idea, su famoso catalejo de aventuras, un auténtico cachondeo, el que te hace ver a la gente y las cosas de lejos, cada vez más lejos por el agujerito y cada vez más deseables, por fuera, a medida que te acercas y pese a ello. Cosacos enterrados cerca del Moulin no conseguían salir de sus tumbas. Hacían esfuerzos espantosos, pero lo habían intentado ya muchas veces… Volvían a caer siempre en el fondo de sus tumbas, aún estaban borrachos desde 1820.

Aun así, un chaparrón los hizo saltar, a ellos también, serenados por fin, muy por encima de la ciudad. Entonces se disgregaron en su ronda y abigarraron la noche con su turbulencia, de una nube a otra… La Ópera, sobre todo, los atraía, al parecer, su gran brasero de anuncios en el medio; salpicaban, los aparecidos, para saltar a otro extremo del cielo y tan agitados y numerosos, que te nublaban la vista. La Perouse, equipado por fin, quiso que lo izaran vertical al sonar las cuatro, lo sostuvieron y lo montaron a horcajadas y derecho. Una vez instalado por fin, a horcajadas, aún gesticulaba, de todos modos, y se movía. Las campanadas de las cuatro lo sacudieron, mientras se abotonaba. Detrás de La Perouse, la gran avalancha del cielo. Una desbandada abominable, llegaban arremolinándose fantasmas, de los cuatro puntos cardinales, todos los aparecidos de todas las epopeyas… Se perseguían, se desafiaban y cargaban siglos contra siglos. El Norte permaneció mucho tiempo recargado con su abominable barahúnda. El horizonte se despejó azulado y el día se alzó al fin por un gran agujero que habían hecho pinchando la noche para escapar.

Después, encontrarlos de nuevo resulta muy difícil. Hay que saber salir del tiempo.

Por el lado de Inglaterra te los encuentras de nuevo, cuando llegas, pero por ese lado la niebla es todo el tiempo tan densa, tan compacta, que es como auténticas velas que suben unas delante de las otras desde la Tierra hasta lo más alto del cielo y para siempre. Con hábito y atención se puede llegar a encontrarlos de nuevo, de todos modos, pero nunca durante mucho tiempo por culpa del viento que no cesa de traer nuevas ráfagas y brumas de alta mar.

La gran mujer que está ahí, que guarda la Isla, es la última. Su cabeza está mucho más alta aún que las brumas más altas. Ella es lo único un poco vivo de la Isla. Sus cabellos rojos, por encima de todo, doran un poco aún las nubes, es lo único que queda del sol.

Intenta hacerse té, según explican.

Tiene que intentarlo, pues está ahí para la eternidad. Nunca acabará de hacerlo hervir, su té, por culpa de la niebla, que se ha vuelto demasiado densa y penetrante. El casco de un barco utiliza de tetera, el más bello, el mayor de los barcos, el último que ha podido encontrar en Southampton, se calienta el té, oleadas y más oleadas… Remueve… Da vueltas todo con un remo enorme… Con eso se entretiene.

No mira nada más, seria para siempre e inclinada.

La ronda ha pasado por encima de ella, pero ni siquiera se ha movido, está acostumbrada a que vengan todos los fantasmas del continente a perderse por allí… Se acabó.

Le basta con hurgar el fuego que hay bajo la ceniza, entre dos bosques muertos, con los dedos.

Intenta reavivarlo., todo le pertenece ahora, pero su té no hervirá nunca más.

Ya no hay vida para las llamas.

Ya no hay vida en el mundo para nadie, salvo un poquito para ella y todo está casi acabado…

Tania me despertó en la habitación donde habíamos acabado acostándonos. Eran las diez de la mañana. Para deshacerme de ella, le conté que no me sentía bien y que me iba a quedar un poco más en la cama.

La vida se reanudaba. Fingió creerme. En cuanto ella hubo bajado, me puse en camino, a mi vez. Tenía algo que hacer, en verdad. La zarabanda de la noche anterior me había dejado como una extraña sensación de remordimiento. El recuerdo de Robinson venía a preocuparme. Era cierto que yo lo había abandonado a su suerte, a ése; peor aún, en manos del padre Protiste. Con eso estaba dicho todo. Desde luego, me habían contado que todo iba de perilla allí abajo, en Toulouse, y que la vieja Henrouille se había vuelto incluso de lo más amable con él. Claro, que, en ciertos casos, verdad, sólo oyes lo que quieres oír y lo que más te conviene… En el fondo, esas vagas indicaciones no demostraban nada.

Inquieto y curioso, me dirigí hacia Rancy en busca de noticias, pero exactas, precisas. Para llegar allí, había que volver a pasar por la Rué des Batignolles, donde vivía Pomone. Era mi camino. Al llegar cerca de su casa, me extrañó mucho vérmelo en la esquina de su calle, a Pomone, como siguiendo a un señor bajito a cierta distancia. Para él, Pomone, que no salía nunca, debía de ser un auténtico acontecimiento. Lo reconocí también, al tipo que seguía, era un cliente, el Cid se hacía llamar en la correspondencia. Pero sabíamos también, por informes confidenciales, que trabajaba en Correos, el Cid.

Desde hacía años no dejaba en paz a Pomone para que le encontrara una amiguita bien educada, su sueño. Pero las señoritas que le presentaban nunca estaban bastante bien educadas para su gusto. Cometían faltas, según decía. Conque la cosa no marchaba. Pensándolo bien, existen dos grandes especies de chorbitas, las que tienen «amplitud de miras» y las que han recibido «una buena educación católica». Dos formas, para las pelanas, de sentirse superiores, dos formas también de excitar a los inquietos y los insatisfechos, el estilo «pajolero» y el estilo «mujer libre».

Todas las economías del Cid habían acabado, mes tras mes, en esas búsquedas. Ahora había llegado, con Pomone, a quedarse sin recursos y sin esperanza también. Más adelante, me enteré de que había ido a suicidarse, el Cid, aquella misma noche en un solar. Por lo demás, en cuanto había yo visto a Pomone salir de su casa, había sospechado que ocurría algo extraordinario. Conque los seguí largo rato por aquel barrio en el que las tiendas van desapareciendo calle adelante y hasta los colores, uno tras otro, para acabar en tascas precarias hasta los límites justos del fielato. Cuando no tienes prisa, te pierdes con facilidad en esas calles, despistado primero por la tristeza y por la demasiada indiferencia del lugar. Si tuvieras un poco de dinero, cogerías un taxi al instante para escapar de tanto hastío. La gente que encuentras arrastra un destino tan pesado, que lo sientes por ellos. Tras las ventanas con visillos, pequeños rentistas han dejado el gas abierto, seguro. No hay nada que hacer. ¡Me cago en la leche!, dices, lo que no sirve de nada.

Y, además, ni un banco para sentarse. Marrón y gris por todos lados. Cuando llueve, cae de todas partes también, de frente y de lado, y la calle resbala entonces como el dorso de un gran pez con una raya de lluvia en medio. No se puede decir siquiera que sea un desorden ese barrio, es más bien como una cárcel, casi bien conservada, una cárcel que no necesita puertas.

Callejeando así, acabé perdiendo de vista a Pomone y a su suicidado después de la rué des Vinaigriers. Así, había llegado tan cerca de la Garenne-Rancy, que no pude por menos de ir a echar un vistazo por encima de las fortificaciones.

De lejos, es atractiva, la Garenne-Rancy, no se puede negar, por los árboles del gran cementerio. Poco falta para que te dejes engañar y jures que estás en el Bois de Boulogne.

Cuando se desean a toda costa noticias de alguien, hay que ir a preguntarlas a quienes las tienen. Al fin y al cabo, me dije entonces, no puedo perder gran cosa haciéndoles una visita, a los Henrouille. Debían de saber cómo iban las cosas en Toulouse. Y, mira por donde, fue una imprudencia de lo lindo la que cometí. Se fía uno demasiado. No sabes que has llegado y, sin embargo, estás ya metido de lleno en las cochinas regiones de la noche. No tarda en sucederte una desgracia entonces. Basta con poco y, además, es que no había que ir a ver de nuevo a cierta gente, sobre todo a ésos. Después es el cuento de nunca acabar.

De rodeos en rodeos, me vi como guiado de nuevo por la costumbre hasta poca distancia del hotelito. Casi no podía creerlo, al verlo en el mismo sitio, su hotelito. Empezó a llover. Ya no había nadie en la calle, excepto yo, que no me atrevía a avanzar más. Iba incluso a dar la vuelta sin insistir, cuando se entreabrió la puerta del hotelito, lo justo para que me hiciera señas de que me acercase, la hija. Ella, por supuesto, veía todo. Me había divisado, vacilante, en la acera de enfrente. Yo ya no deseaba acercarme, pero ella insistía y hasta me llamaba por mi nombre.

«¡Doctor!… ¡Venga, rápido!»

Así me llamaba, con autoridad… Yo temía llamar la atención. Conque me apresuré a subir su pequeña escalinata y a encontrarme de nuevo en el pasillito con la estufa y volver a ver todo el decorado. Volví a sentir una extraña inquietud, de todos modos. Y después se puso a contarme que su marido llevaba dos meses muy enfermo e incluso que empeoraba cada vez más.

Al instante, desconfié, por supuesto.

«¿Y Robinson?», me apresuré a preguntar.

Al principio, eludió mi pregunta. Por fin, se decidió. «Están bien, los dos… Su arreglo funciona en Toulouse», acabó respondiendo, pero así, rápido. Y, sin más ni más, va y me asedia de nuevo a propósito de su marido, enfermo. Quería que fuese a ocuparme de él al instante, de su marido, y sin perder un minuto más. Que si yo era tan servicial… Que si conocía tan bien a su marido… Y que si patatín y que si patatán… Que si él sólo tenía confianza en mí… Que si no había querido que lo visitaran otros médicos… Que si no sabían mi dirección… En fin, zalamerías.

Yo tenía muchas razones para temer que esa enfermedad del marido tuviera también orígenes extraños. Me conocía a la dama y también los usos de la casa. De todos modos, una maldita curiosidad me hizo subir a la habitación.

Estaba acostado precisamente en la misma cama en que había atendido yo a Robinson después de su accidente, unos meses antes.

En unos meses cambia una habitación, aun sin mover nada de su sitio. Por viejas que sean las cosas, por gastadas que estén, encuentran aún, no se sabe cómo, fuerzas para envejecer. Todo había cambiado ya a nuestro alrededor. No los objetos de lugar, claro está, sino las cosas mismas, en profundidad. Son otras, las cosas, cuando las vuelves a ver; tienen, parece, más fuerza para penetrar en nuestro interior con mayor tristeza, con mayor profundidad aún, con mayor suavidad que antes, fundirse en esa especie de muerte que se forma en nosotros despacio, con delicadeza, día tras día, cobardemente, ante la cual cada día nos acostumbramos a defendernos un poco menos que la víspera. De una vez para otra, la vemos ablandarse, arrugarse en nosotros mismos, la vida, y las personas y las cosas con ella, que habíamos dejado triviales, preciosas, temibles a veces. El miedo a acabar ha marcado todo eso con sus arrugas mientras corríamos por la ciudad tras el placer o el pan.

Pronto no quedarán sino personas y cosas inofensivas, lastimosas y desarmadas en torno a nuestro pasado, tan sólo errores enmudecidos.

La mujer nos dejó solos, al marido y a mí. No estaba hecho un pimpollo precisamente, el marido. Ya le fallaba la circulación. Era del corazón.

«Me voy a morir», repetía, con toda simpleza, por cierto.

Era lo que se dice potra, la mía, para verme en casos de ese estilo. Escuchaba latir su corazón, para adoptar una actitud de circunstancias, los gestos que esperaban de mí. Corría su corazón, no había duda, detrás de sus costillas, encerrado, corría tras la vida, a tirones, pero en vano saltaba, no iba a alcanzarla. Estaba aviado. Pronto, a fuerza de tropezar, caería en la podredumbre, su corazón, chorreando, rojo, y babeando como una vieja granada aplastada. Así aparecería su corazón, fláccido, sobre el mármol, cortado por el bisturí después de la autopsia, al cabo de unos días. Pues todo aquello acabaría en una linda autopsia judicial. Yo lo preveía, en vista de que todo el mundo en el barrio iba a contar cosas sabrosas a propósito de aquella muerte, que no iban a considerar normal tampoco, después de lo otro.

La estaban esperando con ganas en el barrio, a su mujer, con todos los chismes acumulados y pendientes del caso anterior. Eso iba a ser un poco más tarde. Por el momento, el marido ya no sabía qué hacer ni cómo morir. Ya estaba como un poco fuera de la vida, pero no conseguía, de todos modos, deshacerse de sus pulmones. Expulsaba el aire y el aire volvía. Le habría gustado abandonar, pero tema que vivir, de todos modos, hasta el final. Era un currelo bien atroz, que lo hacía bizquear.

«Ya no siento los pies… -gemía-. Tengo frío hasta las rodillas…» Quería tocárselos, los pies, pero ya no podía.

Beber tampoco podía. Estaba casi acabado. Al pasarle la tisana preparada por su mujer, yo me preguntaba qué le habría puesto dentro. No olía demasiado bien, la tisana, pero el olor no es una prueba, la valeriana huele muy mal por sí sola. Y, además, que, asfixiándose como se asfixiaba, el marido, ya no importaba demasiado que fuera extraña la tisana. Y, sin embargo, se esforzaba mucho, trabajaba de lo lindo, con todos los músculos que le quedaban bajo la piel, para seguir sufriendo y respirando. Se debatía tanto contra la vida como contra la muerte. Sería justo estallar en casos así. Cuando a la naturaleza le importa tres cojones algo así, parece que ya no hay límites. Detrás de la puerta, su mujer escuchaba la consulta, pero yo me la conocía bien, a su mujer. A hurtadillas, fui a sorprenderla. «¡Cu! ¡Cu!», le dije. No se ofendió lo más mínimo e incluso vino a hablarme al oído:

«Debería usted -me susurró- hacerle quitarse la dentadura postiza… Debe de molestarlo para respirar, la dentadura…» En efecto, yo no tenía inconveniente en que se la quitara, la dentadura.

«Pero, ¡dígaselo usted misma!», le aconsejé. En su estado, era un encargo delicado.

«¡No! ¡No! ¡Es mejor que sea usted! – insistió-. No le va a gustar saber que estoy enterada…»

«¡Ah! – me sorprendí-. ¿Por qué?»

«Hace treinta años que la lleva y nunca me ha hablado de ella…»

«Entonces, tal vez podríamos dejársela -le propuse-. Ya que tiene la costumbre de respirar con ella…»

«¡Oh, no, yo no podría perdonármelo nunca!», me respondió con cierta emoción en la voz…

Entonces volví a hurtadillas a la habitación. Me oyó volver a su lado, el marido. Le agradaba que yo volviera. Entre los sofocos, me hablaba aún, intentaba incluso mostrarse un poco amable conmigo. Me preguntaba cómo me iba, si había encontrado otra clientela… «Sí, sí», le respondía yo a todas las preguntas. Habría sido demasiado largo y complicado explicarle los detalles. No era el momento adecuado. Disimulada tras la puerta, su mujer me hacía señas para que le volviera a pedir que se quitara la dentadura postiza. Conque me acerqué al oído del marido y le aconsejé en voz baja que se la quitase. ¡Qué plancha! «¡La he tirado por el retrete!…», dijo entonces con mayor espanto aún en los ojos. Una coquetería, en una palabra. Y después de eso se puso a lanzar estertores un buen rato.

Se es artista con lo que se puede. Él, en relación con la dentadura postiza, había hecho un esfuerzo estético toda su vida.

El momento de las confesiones. Me habría gustado que aprovechara para darme su opinión sobre lo que había ocurrido con su madre. Pero ya no podía. Desvariaba. Se puso a babear en abundancia. El fin. Ya no se le podía sacar ni una frase. Le sequé la boca y volví a bajar. Su mujer, abajo, en el pasillo, no estaba nada contenta y casi me regañó por lo de la dentadura postiza, como si fuera culpa mía.

«¡De oro era, doctor!… ¡Yo lo sé! ¡Sé cuánto pagó por ella!… ¡Ya no las hacen así!…» Menuda historia. «No tengo inconveniente en subir a intentarlo otra vez», le propuse, de tan violento que me sentía. Pero, con ella; si no, ¡no!

Esa vez ya casi no nos reconocía, el marido. Un poquito sólo. Los estertores eran menos fuertes, cuando estábamos cerca, como si quisiera oír todo lo que hablábamos, su mujer y yo.

No fui al entierro. No hubo autopsia, como yo me había temido un poco. Se hizo todo a la chita callando. Pero eso no quita para que nos hubiéramos enfadado a base de bien, la viuda Henrouille y yo, a propósito de la dentadura postiza.

Los jóvenes tienen tanta prisa siempre por ir a hacer el amor, se apresuran tanto a coger todo lo que les dan a creer, para divertirse, que en materia de sensaciones no se lo piensan dos veces. Es un poco como esos viajeros que van a jalar todo lo que les sirvan en la cantina de la estación, entre dos pitidos. Con tal de que se les proporcione también, a los jóvenes, las dos o tres cantinelas que animan las conversaciones para follar, les basta, y ya los tenemos tan contentos. Se alegran con facilidad, los jóvenes; claro, que gozan como si tal cosa, ¡cierto es!

Toda la juventud acaba en la playa gloriosa, al borde del agua, allí donde las mujeres parecen libres por fin, donde están tan bellas, que ni siquiera necesitan ya la mentira de nuestros sueños.

Conque, por supuesto, llegado el invierno, cuesta regresar, decirse que se acabó, reconocerlo. Nos gustaría quedarnos aún, con el frío, con la edad, no hemos perdido la esperanza. Eso es comprensible. Somos innobles. No hay que culpar a nadie. Goce y felicidad ante todo. Ésa es mi opinión. Y después, cuando empiezas a apartarte de los demás, es señal de que tienes miedo a divertirte con ellos. Es una enfermedad. Habría que saber por qué se empeña uno en no curar de la soledad. Otro tipo que conocí en la guerra, en el hospital, un cabo, me había hablado un poco de esos sentimientos. ¡Lástima que no volviera a verlo nunca, a aquel muchacho! «¡La tierra es muerte!… -me había explicado-. No somos sino gusanos encima de ella, nosotros, gusanos sobre su repugnante y enorme cadáver, jalándole todo el tiempo las tripas y sólo sus venenos… No tenemos remedio. Todos podridos desde el nacimiento… ¡Y se acabó!»

Eso no impidió que se lo llevaran una noche a toda prisa a los bastiones, a aquel pensador, lo que demuestra que aún servía para ser fusilado. Fueron dos guindillas incluso los que se lo llevaron, uno alto y otro bajo. Lo recuerdo bien. Un anarquista, dijeron de él en el consejo de guerra.

Años después, cuando lo piensas, resulta que te gustaría mucho recuperar las palabras que dijeron ciertas personas y a las propias personas para preguntarles qué querían decir… Pero, ¡se marcharon para siempre!… No tenías bastante instrucción para comprenderlas… Te gustaría saber si no cambiarían tal vez de opinión más adelante… Pero es demasiado tarde… ¡Se acabó!… Nadie sabe ya nada de ellas. Conque tienes que continuar tu camino solo, en la noche. Has perdido a tus compañeros de verdad. No les hiciste la pregunta adecuada, la auténtica, cuando aún estabas a tiempo. Cuando estabas junto a ellos, no sabías. Hombre perdido. Siempre estás atrasado. Se trata de lamentos inútiles.

En fin, menos mal que el padre Protiste vino, al menos, a verme una hermosa mañana para que nos repartiéramos la comisión, la que nos correspondía por el asunto del panteón de la tía Henrouille. Yo ya ni siquiera contaba con el cura. Era como si me cayese del cielo… ¡Mil quinientos francos nos correspondían a cada uno! Al mismo tiempo, traía buenas noticias de Robinson. Tenía los ojos mucho mejor, al parecer. Ya ni siquiera le supuraban los párpados. Y todos los de allí abajo querían que yo fuese. Por lo demás, había prometido ir a verlos. El propio Protiste insistía.

Según lo que me contó, comprendí, además, que Robinson iba a casarse pronto con la hija de la vendedora de velas de la iglesia contigua al panteón, aquella de la que dependían las momias de la tía Henrouille. Era casi cosa hecha, ese matrimonio.

Como es lógico, todo eso nos condujo a hablar un poco del deceso del Sr. Henrouille, pero sin insistir, y la conversación cobró un cariz más agradable al tratar del futuro de Robinson y, después, de esa propia ciudad de Toulouse, que yo no conocía y de la que Grappa me había hablado en tiempos, y luego del comercio que

hacían allí, la vieja y él, y, por último, de la muchacha que se iba a casar con Robinson. Un poco sobre todos los temas, en una palabra, y a propósito de todo, charlamos… ¡Mil quinientos francos! Eso me volvía indulgente y, por así decir, optimista. Todos los proyectos de Robinson que me comunicó me parecieron de lo más prudentes, sensatos y juiciosos y muy adaptados a las circunstancias… La cosa se iba a arreglar. Al menos, yo lo creía. Y después nos pusimos a discurrir sobre la cuestión de las edades, el cura y yo. Habíamos superado, los dos, los treinta años hacía ya bastante. Se alejaban en el pasado, nuestros treinta años, en riberas crueles y poco añoradas. Ni siquiera valía la pena volverse para reconocerlas, esas riberas. No habíamos perdido gran cosa al envejecer. «¡Hay que ser muy vil, al fin y al cabo -concluí-, para añorar tal año más que los demás!… ¡Con entusiasmo podemos envejecer nosotros, señor cura, y con decisión, además! ¿Fue acaso divertido ayer? ¿Y el año pasado?… ¿Qué le pareció?… Añorar, ¿qué?… ¡Dígame! ¿La juventud?… Pero, ¡si no tuvimos juventud nosotros!…»

«Rejuvenecen, es verdad, más que nada, por dentro, a medida que avanzan, los pobres, y, al acercarse a su fin, con tal de que hayan intentado perder por el camino toda la mentira y el miedo y el innoble deseo de obedecer que les han infundido al nacer, son, en una palabra, menos repulsivos que al comienzo. ¡El resto de lo que existe en la tierra no es para ellos! ¡No les incumbe! Su misión, la única, es la de vaciarse de su obediencia, vomitarla. Si lo consiguen del todo antes de cascarla, entonces pueden jactarse de que su vida no ha sido inútil!»

Estaba yo animado, la verdad… Aquellos mil quinientos francos me excitaban la imaginación; continué: «La juventud auténtica, la única, señor cura, es amar a todo el mundo sin distinción, eso es lo único cierto, eso es lo único joven y nuevo. Pues bien, ¿conoce usted, señor cura, a muchos jóvenes así? Yo, ¡no!… No veo por todos lados sino necedades sórdidas y viejas que fermentan en cuerpos más o menos recientes y cuanto más fermentan, esas sordideces, más les obsesionan, a los jóvenes, ¡y más fingen entonces ser tremendamente jóvenes! Pero no es verdad, son cuentos… Son jóvenes sólo al modo de los furúnculos, por el pus que les hace daño dentro y los hincha».

Incomodaba a Protiste que le hablara así… Para no ponerlo más nervioso, cambié de conversación… Sobre todo porque acababa de mostrarse muy amable conmigo e incluso providencial… Es de lo más difícil abstenerse de insistir en un tema que te obsesiona tanto como aquél me obsesionaba a mí. Te abruma el tema de tu vida entera, cuando vives solo. Te agobia. Para quitártelo de encima un poco, intentas pringar con él un poco a toda la gente que viene a verte y eso les fastidia. Estar solo es arrastrarse a la muerte. «Habrá que morir -le dije también- más copiosamente que un perro y tardaremos mil minutos en cascarla y cada minuto será nuevo, de todos modos, y ribeteado con suficiente angustia como para hacernos olvidar mil veces todo el placer que podríamos haber tenido haciendo el amor durante mil años de vida… La felicidad en la tierra sería morir con placer, en pleno placer… El resto no es nada, es miedo que no nos atrevemos a confesar, es arte.»

Protiste, al oírme divagar así, pensó que yo acababa de caer enfermo de nuevo. Tal vez tuviera razón y yo me equivocase por completo en todo. En mi retiro, buscando un castigo para el egoísmo universal, me hacía pajas mentales, en verdad, ¡iba a buscarlo hasta la nada, el castigo! Te diviertes como puedes, cuando las ocasiones de salir son escasas, por la falta de dinero, y más escasas aún las ocasiones de salir de ti mismo y de follar.

Reconozco que no tenía del todo razón para fastidiarlo, a Protiste, con mis filosofías contrarias a sus convicciones religiosas, pero es que había en su persona, de todos modos, un cochino regusto de superioridad, que debía de crispar los nervios a mucha gente. Según su idea, estábamos, todos los humanos, en una especie de sala de espera de eternidad en la tierra con números. El número de él era excelente, por supuesto, y para el Paraíso. Lo demás se la sudaba.

Convicciones así son insoportables. En cambio, cuando se ofreció, aquel mismo día por la noche, a adelantarme la suma que necesitaba para el viaje a Toulouse, cesé por completo de importunarlo y de contradecirle. El canguelo que me daba tener que volver a ver a Tania en el Tarapout con su fantasma me hizo aceptar su invitación sin discutir más. En último caso, ¡una o dos semanas de buena vida!, me dije. ¡El diablo conoce todos los trucos para tentarte! Nunca acabaremos de conocerlos. Si viviéramos el tiempo suficiente, no sabríamos ya adonde ir para buscar de nuevo la felicidad. Habríamos dejado abortos de felicidad por todos lados, apestando en los rincones de la tierra, y ya no podríamos ni respirar. Los que están en los museos, los abortos de verdad, hay gente que se pone enferma sólo de verlos y a punto de vomitar. Nuestros intentos también, tan repulsivos, de ser felices, son como para ponerse enfermo, de tan frustrados, y mucho antes de morir para siempre.

No cesaríamos de marchitarnos, si no los olvidáramos. Sin contar los esfuerzos que hemos hecho para llegar adonde estamos, para volver apasionantes nuestras esperanzas, nuestras degeneradas dichas, nuestros fervores y embustes… ¡La tira! Y nuestro dinero, ¿eh? Y modales modernos al tiempo y eternidades para dar y tomar… Y las cosas que nos obligamos a jurar y que juramos y que, según creímos, los demás no habían dicho ni jurado nunca antes de que nos llenaran la cabeza y la boca y perfumes, caricias y mímicas, toda clase de cosas, en una palabra, para acabar ocultándolo lo más posible, para no hablar más, de vergüenza y miedo a que nos vuelva como un vómito. Conque no es empeño lo que nos falta, no, sino más bien estar en el buen camino que conduce a la muerte tranquila.

Ir a Toulouse era, en resumen, otra tontería más. Al reflexionar, no me cupo la menor duda. Conque no tenía excusas. Pero, de seguir a Robinson así, entre sus aventuras, le había yo cogido gusto a los asuntos

turbios. Ya en Nueva York, cuando me tenía quitado el sueño, había empezado a atormentarme la cuestión de si podría acompañar más adelante, y aún más, a Robinson. Te hundes, te espantas, primero, en la noche, pero quieres comprender, de todos modos, y entonces ya no sales de las profundidades. Pero hay demasiadas cosas que comprender a un tiempo. La vida es demasiado corta. No quisieras ser injusto con nadie. Tienes escrúpulos, vacilas a la hora de juzgar todo eso de golpe y temes sobre todo morir mientras vacilas, porque entonces habrías venido a la tierra para nada. De lo malo lo peor.

Tienes que darte prisa, no debes fallar tu propia muerte. La enfermedad, la miseria que te dispersa las horas, los años, el insomnio que te pintarrajea de gris días, semanas enteras, y el cáncer que tal vez te suba ya, meticuloso y sanguinolento, del recto.

¡No voy a tener nunca tiempo!, te dices. Sin contar la guerra, lista siempre también ella, en el hastío criminal de los hombres, para subir del sótano donde se encierran los pobres. ¿Se mata a bastantes pobres? No es seguro… Lo pregunto. ¿No habría tal vez que degollar a todos los que no comprendan? Y que nazcan otros, nuevos pobres y siempre así hasta que aparezcan los que comprendan bien la broma, toda la broma… Igual que se siega el césped hasta el momento en que la hierba es la buena de verdad, la tierna.

Al apearme en Toulouse, me encontré ante la estación bastante indeciso. Una cerveza en la cantina y ya me veía, de todos modos, deambulando por las calles. ¡Es divertido ir por ciudades desconocidas! Es el momento y el lugar en que puedes suponer que toda la gente que encuentras es amable. Es el momento del sueño. Puedes aprovechar que es el sueño para ir a matar un poco de tiempo al jardín público. Sin embargo, pasada cierta edad, a menos que haya razones familiares excelentes, tienes apariencia, como Parapine, de buscar a las niñas en el jardín público, has de andarte con ojo. Es preferible la pastelería, justo antes de cruzar la verja del jardín, bello establecimiento de la esquina decorado como un burdel con pajaritos que cubren los espejos de amplios biseles. Te ves en él comiendo, pensativo, infinitas garrapiñadas. Refugio para serafines. Las señoritas del establecimiento charlan a hurtadillas de sus asuntos del corazón así:

«Entonces le dije que podía venir a buscarme el domingo… Mi tía me oyó y me hizo una escena a causa de mi padre…»

«Pero, ¿no se volvió a casar tu padre?», la interrumpió la amiga.

«¿Qué tiene que ver que volviera a casarse?… Tiene derecho, de todos modos, a saber con quién sale su hija, ¿no?…»

Ésa era también la opinión de la otra señorita de la tienda. Lo que produjo una controversia apasionada entre todas las dependientas. En vano me mantenía yo en mi rincón, para no molestarlas, atiborrándome, sin interrumpirlas, de pastas y trozos de tarta, que, por cierto, no pagué, con la esperanza de que consiguieran resolver antes aquellos delicados problemas de precedencias familiares, seguían igual. Nada aclaraban. Su impotencia especulativa las hacía limitarse a odiar en plena confusión. Reventaban de irracionalidad, vanidad e ignorancia, las señoritas del establecimiento, y echaban chispas susurrándose mil injurias.

Pese a todo, me quedé fascinado con su cochina miseria. Me lancé por los borrachos. Ya es que ni los contaba. Ellas tampoco. Esperaba no tener que irme antes de que hubieran llegado a una conclusión… Pero la pasión las volvía sordas y luego mudas, a mi lado.

Agotada la hiel, se contenían, crispadas, al abrigo del mostrador de los pasteles, cada una de ellas invencible, cerrada, reprimida, cavilando el modo de sacarlo a relucir en otra ocasión, con mayor mala leche, de soltar, a la primera de cambio y con rabia, las memeces rabiosas e hirientes que supiesen de su compañera. Ocasión que, por cierto, no tardaría en presentarse, que provocarían… Desechos de argumentos al asalto de nada en absoluto. Había acabado sentándome para que me aturdieran mejor con el ruido incesante de las palabras, de los abortos de pensamiento, como en una orilla en que las olitas de pasiones incesantes nunca llegaran a organizarse. Escuchas, esperas, confías, aquí, allá, en el tren, en el café, en la calle, en el salón, en la portería, escuchas, esperas que la mala leche se organice, como en la guerra, pero se limita a agitarse y nunca ocurre nada, ni en el caso de esas pobres señoritas ni en los demás tampoco. Nadie viene a ayudarte. Una cháchara inmensa se extiende, gris y monótona, por encima de la vida como un espejismo de lo más desalentador. Dos damas entraron entonces y se rompió el deslucido encanto creado entre las señoritas y yo por la ineficaz conversación. Las clientas fueron objeto de la diligencia inmediata de todo el personal. Se adelantaban a servirles antes de que pidieran. Eligieron, aquí y allá, picaron pastas y tartas para llevar. En el momento de pagar aún se deshacían en cumplidos y pretendieron invitarse mutuamente a hojaldres «para tomar».

Una de ellas rehusó dando mil veces las gracias y explicando por los codos y en confianza, a las otras damas, muy interesadas, que su médico le había prohibido toda clase de dulces, que era maravilloso, su médico, que ya había hecho milagros con el estreñimiento en la ciudad y en otros lugares y que estaba curándola, a ella, entre otras, de una retención de caca que padecía desde hacía más de diez años, gracias a un régimen de lo más especial, gracias también a un medicamento maravilloso conocido sólo por él. Las damas no estaban dispuestas a dejarse superar tan fácilmente en el terreno del estreñimiento. Padecían más que nadie de estreñimiento. Protestaban. Exigían pruebas. La dama en tela de juicio se limitó a añadir que ahora hacía unas ventosidades, al ir al retrete, que eran como fuegos artificiales… que con sus nuevas deposiciones, todas muy bien construidas, muy resistentes, había de tener más cautela… A veces eran tan duras, las nuevas deposiciones maravillosas, que sentía un daño atroz en el trasero… Se le desgarraba… Conque se veía obligada a ponerse vaselina antes de ir al retrete. Era irrefutable.

Así salieron totalmente convencidas, aquellas clientas tan charlatanas, acompañadas hasta la puerta de la pastelería «Aux Petits Oiseaux» por todas las sonrisas del establecimiento.

El jardín público de enfrente me pareció apropiado para hacer un alto, en actitud de recogimiento, el tiempo justo de recobrar el ánimo antes de salir en busca de mi amigo Robinson.

En los parques provinciales los bancos permanecen casi todo el tiempo vacíos durante las mañanas laborables, junto a macizos repletos de cañacoros y margaritas. Cerca de los grutescos, sobre aguas totalmente cautivas, una barquita de zinc, rodeada de cenizas ligeras, se mantenía sujeta a la orilla con una cuerda enmohecida. El esquife navegaba el domingo, estaba anunciado en un cartel y el precio de la vuelta al lago también: «Dos francos.»

¿Cuántos años? ¿Estudiantes? ¿Fantasmas?

En todos los rincones de los jardines públicos hay, olvidados así, montones de sepulcritos cubiertos con las flores del ideal, bosquecillos llenos de promesas y pañuelos llenos de todo. Nada es serio.

De todos modos, ¡basta de quimeras! En marcha, me dije, en busca de Robinson y su iglesia de Sainte-Eponime y de ese panteón cuyas momias guardaba junto con la vieja. Yo había ido a ver todo aquello, tenía que decidirme.

Con un simón empecé a dar vueltas al trote, por el hueco de las umbrosas calles del casco antiguo, donde el día se queda enredado entre los tejados. Armábamos mucho escándalo con las ruedas tras el caballo, todo pezuña, de calzadas a pasarelas. Hace mucho que no se queman ciudades en el Mediodía. Nunca habían sido tan antiguas. Las guerras ya no pasan por allí.

Llegamos ante la iglesia de Sainte-Eponime, cuando daban las doce. El panteón estaba un poco más lejos, bajo un calvario. Me indicaron su emplazamiento en el centro de un jardincillo muy seco. Se entraba a aquella cripta por una especie de agujero con parapeto. De lejos divisé a la guardiana del panteón, una chica joven. Me apresuré a preguntarle por mi amigo Robinson. Estaba cerrando la puerta, aquella muchacha. Me sonrió muy amable para responderme y al instante me dio noticias y buenas.

Con la claridad del mediodía, desde el lugar donde nos encontrábamos, todo se volvía rosa a nuestro alrededor y las piedras desgastadas subían hacia el cielo a lo largo de la iglesia, como dispuestas a ir a fundirse en el aire, por fin, a su vez.

Debía de tener unos veinte años, la amiguita de Robinson, piernas muy firmes y prietas, busto chiquito de lo más agradable y cabecita menuda encima, bien dibujada, preciosa, de ojos tal vez demasiado negros y atentos, para mi gusto. De estilo nada soñador. Ella era quien escribía las cartas de Robinson, las que yo recibía. Me precedió con sus andares seguros hacia el panteón, pies, tobillos bien dibujados y también ligamentos de cachonda que debía de arquearse bien en el momento culminante. Manos breves, duras, firmes, manos de obrera ambiciosa. Giró la llave con un gestito seco. El calor bailaba a nuestro alrededor y temblaba por encima del piso. Hablamos de esto y aquello y después, abierta la puerta, se decidió, de todos modos, a enseñarme el panteón, pese a ser la hora del almuerzo. Yo empezaba a sentirme a gusto. Penetrábamos en el frescor en aumento tras su farol. Era muy agradable. Hice como que tropezaba entre dos peldaños para cogerme a su brazo, lo que nos hizo bromear y, al llegar a la tierra batida abajo, le di un besito en el cuello. Protestó al principio, pero no demasiado.

Al cabo de un momentito de afecto, me retorcí en torno a su vientre como un auténtico gusano enamorado. Nos mojábamos y remojábamos, viciosos, los labios, para la conversación de las almas. Le subí una mano despacio por los muslos arqueados; es agradable, con el farol en el suelo, porque se pueden contemplar al mismo tiempo los relieves en movimiento a lo largo de la pierna. Es una posición recomendable. ¡Ah! ¡No hay que perderse nada de momentos así! Bizqueas de gusto. Te sientes bien recompensado. ¡Qué impulso! ¡Qué buen humor de repente! La conversación se reanudó en otro tono, de confianza y sencillez. Éramos amigos. Lo primero, ¡darle al asunto! Acabábamos de economizar diez años.

«¿Acompañas a menudo a las visitas? – le pregunté entre resoplidos y con descaro. Pero al instante proseguí-: Es tu madre, ¿verdad?, la que vende las velas en la iglesia de al lado… El padre Protiste me habló también de ella.»

«Substituyo a la Sra. Henrouille sólo al mediodía… -respondió-. Por las tardes trabajo en una casa de modas… en la Rué du Théátre… ¿Has pasado por delante del Teatro al venir?»

Me tranquilizó una vez más respecto a Robinson: se encontraba mucho mejor e incluso el especialista de los ojos pensaba que pronto vería lo bastante como para ir solo por la calle. Ya lo había intentado incluso. Era un presagio excelente. La tía Henrouille, por su parte, se declaraba encantada con la cripta. Hacía negocio y economías. Un único inconveniente: en la casa en que vivían, las chinches no dejaban dormir a nadie, sobre todo durante las noches de tormenta. Conque quemaban azufre. Al parecer, Robinson hablaba con frecuencia de mí y en términos aún elogiosos. De una cosa a otra, pasamos a la historia y las circunstancias de la boda.

Es cierto que con todo aquello aún no le había preguntado yo cómo se llamaba. Madelon se llamaba. Había nacido durante la guerra. Su proyecto de boda, al fin y al cabo, me venía muy bien. Madelon era nombre fácil de recordar. Seguro que sabía lo que hacía casándose con Robinson… A pesar de sus progresos, iba a ser siempre un inválido, en una palabra… Y, además, ella creía que sólo le había afectado a los ojos… Pero tenía los nervios enfermos, ¡y el ánimo, pues, y lo demás! Estuve a punto de decírselo, de avisarla… Las conversaciones sobre matrimonios nunca he sabido yo cómo orientarlas ni cómo salir de ellas.

Para cambiar de tema, sentí gran interés repentino por las cosas de la cripta y, puesto que venía de muy lejos para verla, era el momento de ocuparse de ella.

Con su farolito, Madelon y yo los hicimos salir de la sombra, a los cadáveres, de la pared, uno por uno. ¡Debían de hacerlos reflexionar, a los turistas! Pegados a la pared, como fusilados, estaban aquellos muertos hacía tiempo… No les quedaba ya ni piel ni huesos ni ropa… Un poco sólo de todo ello… En estado lamentable y agujereados por todas partes… El tiempo, que llevaba años royéndoles la piel, seguía sin soltarlos… Aún les desgarraba trozos de rostro, aquí y allá, el tiempo… Les agrandaba todos los agujeros y les encontraba aún largos cabos de epidermis, que la muerte había olvidado sobre los cartílagos. El vientre se les había vaciado de todo, pero ahora parecían tener una cunita de sombra en lugar de ombligo.

Madelon me explicó que en un cementerio de cal viva habían esperado más de quinientos años, los muertos, para llegar a aquel estado. No se habría podido decir que fueran cadáveres. La época de cadáveres había acabado de una vez por todas para ellos. Habían llegado a los confines del polvo, despacito.

Los había, en aquel panteón, grandes y pequeños, veintiséis en total, deseosos de entrar en la Eternidad. Aún no les dejaban. Mujeres con cofias colocadas en lo alto del esqueleto, un jorobado, un gigante e incluso un niño de pecho, muy acabadito, también él, con una especie de babero de encaje en torno al cuello, faltaría más, y un jirón de pañal.

Ganaba mucho dinero, la tía Henrouille, con aquellos restos de siglos. Cuando pienso que yo la había conocido, a ella, casi igual a aquellos fantasmas… Así volvimos a pasar despacio ante todos ellos, Madelon y yo. Una a una, sus cabezas, por llamarlas de algún modo, fueron apareciendo en silencio en el círculo de cruda luz de la lámpara. No es exactamente noche lo que tienen en el fondo de las órbitas, es aún una mirada casi, pero más dulce, como la de las personas que saben. Lo que molesta más que nada es su olor a polvo, que te retiene por la punta de la nariz.

La tía Henrouille no se perdía una visita con los turistas. Los hacía trabajar, a los muertos, como en un circo. Cien francos al día le proporcionaban en la temporada alta.

«¿Verdad que no tienen aspecto triste?», me preguntó Madelon. La pregunta era ritual.

La muerte no le decía nada, a aquella monina. Había nacido durante la guerra, época de muerte fácil. Yo sabía bien cómo se muere. Lo había aprendido. Hace sufrir atrozmente. Se puede contar a los turistas que esos muertos están contentos. No tienen nada que decir. La tía Henrouille les daba incluso palmaditas en el vientre, cuando aún les quedaba bastante pergamino encima y resonaban: «bum, bum». Pero eso tampoco es prueba de que todo vaya bien.

Por fin, volvimos a nuestros asuntos, Madelon y yo. Así, que era totalmente cierto que se encontraba mejor, Robinson. Yo, encantado. ¡Parecía impaciente por casarse, la amiguita! Debía de aburrirse de lo lindo en Toulouse. Allí eran raras las ocasiones de conocer a un muchacho que hubiese viajado tanto como Robinson. ¡Menudo si sabía historias! Verdaderas y no tan verdaderas también. Ya le había hablado mucho, por cierto, de América y de los trópicos. Era perfecto.

Yo también había estado, en América y en los trópicos. Yo también sabía historias. Me proponía contarlas. A fuerza de viajar juntos era como nos habíamos hecho amigos incluso, Robinson y yo. El farol se estaba apagando. Volvimos a encenderlo diez veces, mientras arreglábamos el pasado con el porvenir. Ella me negaba los senos, demasiado sensibles.

De todos modos, como la tía Henrouille iba a regresar de un momento a otro del almuerzo, tuvimos que volver a la luz del día por la escalerita empinada y frágil y difícil como una escala. Lo noté.

Por culpa de aquella escalerita tan estrecha y traidora, Robinson bajaba pocas veces a la cripta de las momias. A decir verdad, se quedaba más bien ante la puerta, charlando un poco con los turistas y entrenándose para encontrar la luz, por aquí y por allá, y a través de los ojos.

En las profundidades, entretanto, se espabilaba la tía Henrouille. Trabajaba por dos, en realidad, con las momias. Amenizaba la visita de los turistas con un discursito sobre sus muertos de pergamino. «No son asquerosos, ni mucho menos, señoras y señores, ya que han estado conservados en cal viva, como ven, y desde hace más de cinco siglos… Nuestra colección es única en el mundo… La carne ha desaparecido, desde luego… Sólo les ha quedado la piel, pero está curtida… Están desnudos, pero no indecentes… Como verán, a un niño lo enterraron al tiempo que a su madre… Está muy conservado también, el niño… Y ese grande, con su camisa y su encaje, que viene después… Tiene todos los dientes… Como ven… -Volvía a darles palmaditas en el pecho, a todos, para acabar y sonaban como un tambor-. Ya ven, señoras y señores, que a éste sólo le queda un ojo… sequito… y la lengua… ¡que se ha vuelto como cuero también! – Se la sacaba-. Saca la lengua, pero no es repugnante… Pueden dejar la voluntad, al marcharse, señoras y señores, pero se suelen dejar dos francos por persona y la mitad por los niños… Pueden tocarlos antes de irse… Darse cuenta por sí mismos… Pero háganlo con cuidado… Se lo recomiendo… Son de lo más frágil…»

La tía Henrouille, nada más llegar, había pensado aumentar los precios, era cosa de entenderse con el obispado. Pero no era tan fácil por culpa del cura de Sainte-Eponime, que quería quedarse con la tercera parte de la recaudación, para él sólito, y también de Robinson, que protestaba, continuamente porque ella no le daba bastante comisión, le parecía a él.

«Ya me he dejado engañar -decía- como un pardillo… Otra vez… ¡Tengo la negra!… ¡Y eso que es buen asunto, la cripta de la vieja!… Y se forra, la tía puta esa, te lo digo yo.»

«Pero, ¡tú no pusiste dinero en el negocio!… -le objetaba yo para calmarlo y hacerle comprender-. ¡Y estás bien alimentado!… ¡Y te cuidan!…»

Pero era obstinado como un abejorro, Robinson, auténtica naturaleza de perseguido. No quería comprender, ni resignarse.

«Al fin y al cabo, ¡te has librado bastante bien de un asunto muy sucio! ¡Te lo aseguro!… ¡No te quejes! Ibas derechito a Cayena, si no te hubiéramos echado una mano… ¡Y te hemos buscado un sitio tranquilito!… Y, además, has conocido a Madelon, que es buena y te quiere… ¡Enfermo como estás!… Conque, ¿de qué vienes a quejarte?… ¡Sobre todo ahora que has mejorado de los ojos!…»

«Pareces querer decir que no sé de qué me quejo, ¿eh? – me respondía entonces-. Pero siento, de todos modos, que debo quejarme… Así es… Ya sólo me queda eso… Voy a decirte una cosa… Es lo único que me permiten… No están obligados a escucharme.»

En realidad, no cesaba de quejarse, en cuanto nos quedábamos solos. Yo había llegado a temer esos momentos de confianza. Lo veía con sus ojos parpadeantes, aún un poco supurantes al sol, y me decía que, después de todo, no era simpático, Robinson. Hay animales hechos así; de nada sirve que sean inocentes e infelices y demás, lo sabemos y, aun así, nos caen mal. Les falta algo.

«Podías haberte podrido en la cárcel…», volvía yo a la carga, para hacerlo reflexionar de nuevo.

«Pero, ¡si ya he estado en la cárcel!… ¡No es peor que como estoy ahora!… ¡Tú qué sabes!…»

No me había contado que hubiese estado en la cárcel. Debía de haber sido antes de que nos conociéramos, antes de la guerra. Insistía y concluía: «Sólo hay una libertad, te lo digo yo, una sola. Ver claro, en primer lugar, y después estar forrado de pasta, ¡lo demás son cuentos!…».

«Entonces, ¿adonde quieres llegar?», le decía yo. Cuando se lo instaba así, a decidirse, a pronunciarse de una vez, se desinflaba. Sin embargo, era cuando podría haber sido interesante…

Mientras Madelon se iba, por el día., a su taller y la tía Henrouille enseñaba sus restos a los clientes, íbamos, nosotros, al café bajo los árboles. Ése era un rincón que le gustaba mucho, el café bajo los árboles, a Robinson. Probablemente por el ruido que hacían por encima los pájaros. ¡Qué cantidad de pájaros! Sobre todo hacia las cinco, cuando volvían al nido, muy excitados por el verano. Caían entonces sobre la plaza como una tormenta. Contaban incluso que un peluquero, que tenía su establecimiento junto al jardín, se había vuelto loco, sólo de oírlos piar todos juntos durante años. Es cierto que ya no nos oíamos, al hablar. Pero era alegre, de todos modos, le parecía a Robinson.

«Si al menos me diera veinte céntimos por visitante, ¡me parecería bien!»

Volvía, cada cinco minutos más o menos, a su preocupación. Entretanto, los colores del tiempo pasado parecían volverle a la cabeza, pese a todo, historias también, las de la Compañía Porduriére en África, entre otras, que habíamos conocido muy bien los dos, ¡qué caramba!, e historias verdes que aún no me había contado nunca. Tal vez no se hubiese atrevido. Era bastante reservado, en el fondo, misterioso incluso.

En punto a tiempo perdido, de Molly sobre todo era de quien me acordaba bien, yo cuando me sentía tierno, como del eco de una hora dada a lo lejos, y, cuando pensaba en algo agradable, en seguida pensaba en ella.

Al fin y al cabo, cuando el egoísmo cede un poco, cuando el momento de acabar de una vez llega, en punto a recuerdos no conservamos en el corazón sino el de las mujeres que amaban de verdad un poco a los hombres, no sólo a uno, aunque fueras tú, sino a todos.

Al volver por la noche del café, no habíamos hecho nada, como suboficiales jubilados.

Durante la temporada alta, los turistas no cesaban de acudir. Rondaban por la cripta y la tía Henrouille conseguía hacerlos reír. Al cura no le hacían demasiada gracia, aquellas bromas, pero, como recibía más de lo que le correspondía, no abría la boca y, además, es que, en materia de chocarrerías, no entendía. Y, sin embargo, valía la pena, ver y oír a la tía Henrouille, en medio de sus cadáveres. Se los miraba fijamente a la cara, ella que no tenía miedo a la muerte, pese a estar tan arrugada, tan apergaminada ya, también ella, que era como uno de ellos, con su farol, que fuese a charlar delante de sus narices, por llamarlas de algún modo.

Cuando regresábamos a la casa y nos reuníamos para cenar, volvía a hablarse de la recaudación y, además, la tía Henrouille me llamaba su «Doctor Chacal» por lo que había ocurrido entre nosotros en Rancy. Pero todo ello en broma, por supuesto. Madelon se ajetreaba en la cocina. Aquella vivienda en que nos alojábamos recibía una luz muy mortecina, dependencia de la sacristía, muy estrecha, llena de viguetas y recovecos polvorientos. «De todos modos -comentaba la vieja-, aunque sea de noche, por así decir, todo el tiempo, encuentras la cama, el bolsillo y la boca, ¡y con eso basta y sobra!»

Tras la muerte de su hijo, no había sufrido demasiado tiempo. «Siempre estuvo muy delicado -me contaba una noche, hablando de él-, y yo, fíjese, que ya tengo setenta y siete años, ¡nunca me he quejado de nada!… Él siempre estaba quejándose, era su forma de ser, exactamente como Robinson… por citar un ejemplo. Así, que la escalerita de la cripta es dura, ¿eh?… ¿La conoce usted?… Me cansa, desde luego, pero hay días en que me produce hasta dos francos por escalón… Los he contado… Bueno, pues, por ese precio, ¡subiría, si me lo pidieran, hasta el cielo!»

Ponía muchas especias en la comida, la Madelon, y tomate también. Comida rica. Y vino rosado. Hasta a Robinson le había dado por el vino, a fuerza de vivir en el Mediodía. Ya me lo había contado todo, Robinson, lo que había ocurrido desde su llegada a Toulouse. Yo ya no lo escuchaba. Me decepcionaba y me disgustaba un poco, en una palabra. «Eres un burgués -esa conclusión acabé sacando (porque para mí no había peor injuria en aquella época)-. No piensas, en definitiva, sino en el dinero… Cuando recuperes la vista, ¡te habrás vuelto peor que los demás!»

Las broncas lo dejaban frío. Daba incluso la impresión de que le infundían valor. Además, sabía que era verdad. Ese chico, me decía yo, ya está encarrilado, ya no hay que preocuparse por él… Una mujercita un poco violenta y un poco viciosa, digan lo que digan, te transforma a un hombre, que no lo reconoces… A Robinson, me decía yo también… lo tomé mucho tiempo por un aventurero, pero no es sino un calzonazos, cornudo o no, ciego o no… Y se acabó.

Además, la vieja Henrouille lo había contaminado en seguida, con su pasión por las economías, y también la Madelon, con sus ganas de casarse. Conque sólo faltaba eso. No sabía él lo que le esperaba. Sobre todo porque le iba a coger gusto, a la chavala. Que me lo dijeran a mí. Sería mentira, lo primero, decir que yo no estaba un poco celoso, no sería justo. Madelon y yo nos veíamos un momentito de vez en cuando, antes de cenar, en su habitación. Pero no eran fáciles de organizar, aquellas entrevistas. No decíamos nada. Éramos los más discretos del mundo.

No por ello debe pensarse que no lo amara, a su Robinson. No tenía nada que ver. Sólo que él jugaba al noviazgo, conque ella también, naturalmente, jugaba a las fidelidades. Ése era el sentimiento entre ellos. Lo principal en esos casos es entenderse. Esperaba a casarse para meterle mano, me había confiado. Ésa era su idea. Para él la eternidad, pues, y para mí la inmediatez. Por lo demás, me había hablado de un proyecto que

tenía, además, para establecerse en un pequeño restaurante, con ella, y plantar a la vieja Henrouille. Todo en serio, pues. «Es agradable, gustará a la clientela -preveía en sus mejores momentos-. Y, además, ya has visto cómo cocina, ¿eh? ¡No tiene que envidiar a nadie, con el papeo!»

Pensaba incluso que podría sablearle un capitalito inicial, a la tía Henrouille. A mí me parecía bien, pero preveía que le costaría mucho convencerla. «Tú ves todo de color de rosa», le comentaba yo, para calmarlo y hacerle reflexionar un poco. De pronto se echaba a llorar y me llamaba desgraciado. En una palabra, que no hay que desanimar a nadie; al instante, reconocía yo estar equivocado y que lo que me había perdido, en el fondo, había sido el desánimo. Lo que sabía hacer antes de la guerra, Robinson, era el grabado en cobre, pero no quería volver a probarlo, a ningún precio. Era muy dueño. «Con mis pulmones el aire libre es lo que necesito, compréndelo, y, además, que mis ojos no van a ser nunca como antes.» No dejaba de tener razón, en un sentido. No había nada que replicar. Cuando paseábamos juntos por las calles frecuentadas, la gente se volvía para compadecer al ciego. Tiene piedad, la gente, de los inválidos y los ciegos y se puede decir que tienen amor en reserva. Yo lo había sentido, muchas veces, el amor en reserva. Hay en cantidad. No se puede negar. Sólo, que es una pena que siga siendo tan cabrona, la gente, con tanto amor en reserva. No sale y se acabó. Se les queda ahí dentro, no les sirve de nada. Revientan, de amor, dentro.

Después de la cena, Madelon se ocupaba de él, de su Léon, como lo llamaba ella. Le leía el periódico. Él se pirraba por la política ahora y los periódicos del Mediodía apestan a política y de la animada.

A nuestro alrededor, por la noche, la casa se hundía en el tostadero de los siglos. Era el momento, después de cenar, en que las chinches van a explayarse, el momento también de probar con ellas, las chinches, los efectos de una solución corrosiva que yo quería ceder después a un farmacéutico por un pequeño beneficio. Un apañito. A la tía Henrouille la distraía, mi experimento, y me ayudaba, íbamos juntos de nido en nido, por las rendijas, los rincones, vaporizando sus enjambres con mi vitriolo. Bullían y se desvanecían bajo la vela que me sujetaba, muy atenta, la tía Henrouille.

Mientras trabajábamos, hablábamos de Rancy. Sólo de pensar en eso, en ese lugar, me daban ganas de vomitar, me habría quedado con gusto en Toulouse el resto de mi vida. No pedía otra cosa, en el fondo, papeo asegurado y tiempo libre. La felicidad, vamos. Pero tuve que pensar, de todos modos, en la vuelta y el currelo. El tiempo pasaba y la prima del cura también y los ahorros.

Antes de marcharme, quise dar unas lecciones y consejos a Madelon. Más vale, desde luego, dar dinero, cuando se puede y se quiere hacer el bien. Pero también puede ser útil ser prevenido y saber bien a qué atenerse exactamente y sobre todo el riesgo que se corre jodiendo a diestro y siniestro. Era eso lo que yo me decía, sobre todo porque en materia de enfermedades me daba un poco de miedo Madelon. Espabilada, desde luego, pero lo más ignorante del mundo sobre microbios. Conque fui y me lancé a explicaciones muy detalladas sobre lo que debía mirar detenidamente antes de responder a cumplidos. Si estaba roja… si había una gota en la puntita… En fin, cosas clásicas que se deben saber y de lo más útiles… Tras haberme escuchado atenta y haberme dejado hablar, protestó, por cumplir. Me hizo incluso una escena… Que si ella era formal… Que si era una vergüenza por mi parte… Que quién me había creído que era… Que no porque conmigo… Que si la estaba insultando… Que si los hombres eran todos unos asquerosos…

En fin, todo lo que dicen, todas las damas, en casos así. Era de esperar. El paripé. Lo principal, para mí, era que hubiese escuchado bien mis consejos y hubiera asimilado lo esencial. Lo demás no tenía la menor importancia. Tras haberme oído atenta, lo que en el fondo la entristecía era pensar que se pudiese pescar todo lo que yo le contaba sólo por la ternura y el placer. Aunque fuese cosa de la naturaleza, yo le parecía tan asqueroso como la naturaleza y se sentía insultada. No insistí más, salvo para hablarle un poco de los condones, tan cómodos. Por último, para dárnoslas de psicólogos, intentamos analizar un poco el carácter de Robinson. «No es celoso precisamente -me dijo entonces-, pero tiene momentos difíciles».

«¡Vale, vale!…», le respondí, y me lancé a una definición de su carácter, de Robinson, como si lo conociera, yo, su carácter, pero al instante me di cuenta de que no lo conocía apenas, a Robinson, salvo algunas evidencias groseras de su temperamento. Nada más.

Es asombroso cuánto cuesta imaginar lo que puede volver a una persona agradable para los demás… Y, sin embargo, quieres servirle, serle favorable, y farfullas… Es lastimoso, desde las primeras palabras… Estás pez.

En nuestros días, hacer de «La Bruyére» no es cómodo. Descubres el pastel del inconsciente, en cuanto te aproximas.

Cuando iba a ir a comprar el billete, me retuvieron una semana más, en eso quedamos. Para enseñarme los alrededores de Toulouse, las orillas del río, muy fresquitas, de que me habían hablado mucho, y llevarme a visitar sobre todo los bonitos viñedos de los alrededores, de los que todo el mundo en la ciudad parecía orgulloso y contento, como si fueran ya todos propietarios. No podía irme así, tras haber visitado sólo los cadáveres de la tía Henrouille. ¡No podía ser! En fin, cumplidos…

Tanta amabilidad me desarmaba. No me atrevía a insistir demasiado en quedarme por mi intimidad con la Madelon, intimidad que estaba volviéndose un poco peligrosa. La vieja empezaba a sospechar que había algo entre nosotros. Un estorbo.

Pero no iba a acompañarnos, la vieja, en aquel paseo. En primer lugar, no quería cerrar la cripta, ni siquiera por un solo día. Conque acepté quedarme y un hermoso domingo por la mañana nos pusimos en camino hacia el campo. A él, Robinson, lo llevábamos del brazo entre los dos. En la estación cogimos billetes de segunda. Olía de lo lindo a salchichón, de todos modos, en el compartimento, como en tercera. En un lugar

que se llamaba Saint-Jean nos apeamos. Madelon parecía conocer bien la región y, además, en seguida se encontró con conocidos procedentes de todos los rincones. Se anunciaba un bonito día de verano, eso seguro. Mientras paseábamos, habíamos de contar todo lo que veíamos a Robinson. «Aquí hay un jardín… Ahí, mira, un puente y debajo un pescador… No pesca nada… Cuidado con esa bici…» Ahora, que el olor de las patatas fritas lo guiaba perfectamente. Fue él incluso quien nos llevó hasta la freiduría, donde las hacían, las patatas fritas, a cincuenta céntimos la ración. Siempre le habían gustado, las patatas fritas, desde que yo lo conocía, a Robinson, igual que a mí, por cierto. Es muy parisino, el gusto por las patatas fritas. Madelon, por su parte, prefería el vermut, seco y solo.

Los ríos lo pasan mal en el Mediodía. Parece que sufren, siempre están secándose. Colinas, sol, pescadores, peces, barcos, zanjas, lavaderos, viñas, sauces llorones, todo el mundo los quiere, todo los reclama. Les exigen demasiada agua, conque queda poca en el lecho del río. Parece en algunos puntos un camino un poco inundado más que un río de verdad. Como habíamos salido en busca de diversión, teníamos que apresurarnos para encontrarla. En cuanto acabamos las patatas fritas, decidimos dar una vuelta en barca, que nos distraería antes del almuerzo, yo remando, claro está, y ellos dos frente a mí, cogidos de la mano, Robinson y Madelon.

Conque salimos surcando las aguas, como se suele decir, y rozando el fondo aquí y allá, ella lanzando gritos y él no demasiado seguro tampoco. Moscas y más moscas. Libélulas que vigilaban el río con sus enormes ojos por doquier y moviendo la cola, temerosas. Un calor asombroso, como para hacer humear todas las superficies. Nos deslizábamos desde los anchos remolinos planos hasta las ramas muertas… Al ras de riberas ardientes pasamos, en busca de bocanadas de sombra que atrapábamos como podíamos detrás de árboles no demasiado acribillados por el sol. Hablar daba más calor aún, de ser posible. No nos atrevíamos a decir que nos sentíamos mal.

Robinson se cansó el primero, cosa natural, de la navegación. Entonces propuse que atracáramos delante de un restaurante. No éramos los únicos que habíamos tenido esa idea. Todos los pescadores de aquel tramo, la verdad, se habían instalado ya en la taberna, antes que nosotros, ávidos de aperitivos y parapetados tras sus sifones. Robinson no se atrevía a preguntarme si era cara, aquella tasca, que yo había elegido, pero al instante le quité esa preocupación asegurándole que todos los precios estaban anunciados y eran muy razonables. Era cierto. Ya no soltaba la mano de su Madelon.

Puedo decir ahora que pagamos en aquel restaurante como si hubiéramos comido, pero sólo habíamos intentado jalar. Más vale no hablar de los platos que nos sirvieron. Aún siguen allí.

Para pasar la tarde, después, organizar una sesión de pesca con Robinson era demasiado complicado y le habríamos apenado, pues ni siquiera habría visto el flotador. Pero a mí, por otro lado, la idea de remar, después del trago de la mañana, me ponía enfermo. Ya tenía bastante. Había perdido el entrenamiento de los ríos de África. Había envejecido en eso como en todo.

Para cambiar, de todos modos, de ejercicio, dije entonces que un paseíto a pie, simplemente, a lo largo de la orilla, nos sentaría pero que muy bien, al menos hasta aquellas hierbas altas que se veían a menos de un kilómetro de distancia, cerca de una cortina de álamos.

Ahí nos teníais de nuevo, a Robinson y a mí, en marcha y cogidos del brazo, mientras que Madelon nos precedía unos pasos más adelante. Era más cómodo para avanzar entre las hierbas. En un recodo del río oímos las notas de un acordeón. De una gabarra procedía, el sonido, una hermosa gabarra amarrada en aquel punto del río. La música hizo detener a Robinson. Era muy comprensible en su caso y, además, que siempre había sentido debilidad por la música. Conque, contentos de haber encontrado algo que lo divirtiera, nos sentamos en aquel césped mismo, menos polvoriento que el de la orilla en declive de al lado. Se veía que no era una gabarra corriente. Muy limpia y cuidada estaba, una gabarra para vivienda exclusivamente, no para carga, toda llena de flores y con una casilla muy peripuesta y todo, para el perro. Le describimos la gabarra, a Robinson. Quería enterarse de todo.

«Me gustaría mucho, a mí también, vivir en un barco como ése -dijo entonces-. ¿Y a ti?», fue y preguntó a Madelon.

«¡Anda, que ya sé adonde quieres ir a parar! – respondió ella-. Pero, ¡eso es muy caro, Léon! ¡Es mucho más caro aún, estoy segura, que una casa de alquiler!»

Nos pusimos, los tres, a pensar en lo que podía costar una gabarra así y no nos salía el cálculo… Cada uno daba una cifra. Por la costumbre que teníamos de contar en voz alta todo… La música del acordeón nos llegaba muy melosa, entretanto, e incluso la letra de una canción de acompañamiento… Al final, coincidimos en que debía de costar, tal cual, por lo menos cien mil francos, la gabarra. Como para dejarlo a uno turulato…

Ferme tesjolis yeux, car les heures sont breves…

Aupays merveilleux, au douxpays du ré-é-éve

Eso era lo que cantaban en el interior, voces de hombres y mujeres mezcladas, desafinando un poco, pero muy agradables, de todos modos, gracias al lugar. No desentonaba con el calor, el campo, la hora que era y el río.

Robinson se empeñaba en contar miles y cientos. Le parecía que valía más aún, tal como se la habíamos descrito, la gabarra… Porque tenía una claraboya para ver mejor dentro y cobres por todos lados: lujo, vamos…

«Léon, no te canses -intentaba calmarlo Madelon-, túmbate en la hierba, que está muy mullida, y descansa un poco… Cien mil o quinientos mil, no está a nuestro alcance, ¿no?… Conque no vale la pena, verdad, que te

hagas ilusiones…»

Pero estaba tumbado y se hacía ilusiones, de todos modos, con el precio, y quería enterarse a toda costa e intentar verla, la gabarra que valía tan cara…

«¿Tiene motor?», preguntaba… Nosotros no sabíamos.

Fui a mirar por detrás, ya que insistía, sólo por complacerlo, para ver si veía el tubo de un motorcito.

Ferme tes jolis yeux, car la vie n'est qu'un songe…

L'amour n'est qu'un menson-on-on-ge…

Ferme tes jolis yeuuuuuuux!

Seguían así cantando, dentro. Nosotros, por fin, caímos rendidos de cansancio… Nos adormilaban.

En determinado momento, el podenco de la casilla saltó afuera y fue a ladrar sobre la pasarela en nuestra dirección. Despertamos sobresaltados y nos pusimos a gritarle, al podenco. Miedo de Robinson.

Un tipo que parecía el propietario salió entonces al puente por la portezuela de la gabarra. ¡No quería que gritáramos a su perro y tuvimos unas palabras! Pero, cuando comprendió que Robinson estaba, por así decir, ciego, se calmó al instante, aquel hombre e incluso se mostró como un chorra. Dio marcha atrás y hasta se dejó llamar grosero para arreglar las cosas… Para resarcirnos, nos rogó que fuésemos a tomar café con él, en su gabarra, porque era su santo, fue y añadió. No quería que siguiésemos ahí, al sol, achicharrándonos, y que si patatín y que si patatán… Y que si veníamos al pelo, precisamente, porque eran trece a la mesa… Hombre joven era, el patrón, un fantasioso. Le gustaban los barcos, fue y nos explicó también… Comprendimos en seguida. Pero a su mujer le daba miedo el mar, conque habían amarrado allí, por así decir, sobre los guijarros. En la gabarra, parecieron muy contentos de recibirnos. Su esposa, en primer lugar, mujer bella que tocaba el acordeón como un ángel. Y, además, ¡que eso de habernos invitado a tomar café era amable, de todos modos, de su parte! ¡Podríamos haber sido sabe Dios qué! Era, en una palabra, una prueba de confianza por su parte… En seguida comprendimos que no debíamos desairar a aquellos encantadores anfitriones… Sobre todo ante sus invitados… Robinson tenía muchos defectos, pero era, de ordinario, un muchacho sensible. Para sus adentros, sólo por las voces, comprendió que había que comportarse bien y no soltar groserías. No íbamos bien vestidos, bien es verdad, pero sí muy limpios y decentes, de todos modos. El patrón de la gabarra, lo examiné de más cerca, debía de tener unos treinta años, con hermosos cabellos castaños y poéticos y un traje muy mono de estilo marinero, pero relamido. Su bella esposa tenía, por cierto, auténticos ojos «aterciopelados».

Acababan de terminar su almuerzo. Los restos eran copiosos. No rechazamos el trozo de tarta, ¡ni hablar! Ni el oporto para acompañarlo. Desde hacía mucho tiempo, no había oído yo voces tan distinguidas. Tienen una forma de hablar, las personas distinguidas, que te intimida y a mí me asusta, sencillamente, sobre todo sus mujeres, y, sin embargo, son simples frases mal paridas y presuntuosas, pero, eso sí, bruñidas como muebles antiguos. Dan miedo, sus frases, aun anodinas. Temes patinar encima de ellas, al responderles simplemente. Y hasta cuando cobran tono barriobajero para cantar canciones de pobres por diversión, lo conservan, ese acento distinguido, que te inspira recelo y asco, un acento en el que parece vibrar un latiguillo, siempre, el que se necesita, siempre, para hablar a los criados. Es excitante, pero al mismo tiempo te incita a cepillarte a sus mujeres, solo para verla derretirse, su dignidad, como ellos la llaman…

Expliqué en voz baja a Robinson el mobiliario que había a nuestro alrededor, todo él antiguo. Me recordaba un poco la tienda de mi madre, pero más limpio y mejor arreglado, evidentemente. En casa de mi madre siempre olía a rancio.

Y, además, colgados en los tabiques, cuadros del patrón, infinidad. Pintor él. Fue su mujer la que me lo reveló y con mil remilgos, encima. Su mujer lo amaba, se veía, a su hombre. Era un artista, el patrón, hermoso sexo, hermosos cabellos, hermosas rentas, todo lo necesario para ser feliz; y, encima, el acordeón, amigos, ensueños en el barco, sobre las aguas escasas y que se arremolinaban, muy contentos de no partir nunca… Tenían todo aquello en su casa con toda la dulzura y el frescor precioso del mundo entre los visillos y el hálito del ventilador y la divina seguridad.

Puesto que habíamos acudido, debíamos ponernos en consonancia. Bebidas heladas y fresas con nata, primero, mi postre preferido. Madelon se moría de ganas de repetir. También ella se dejaba conquistar ahora por los buenos modales. Los hombres la consideraban simpática, a Madelon, el suegro sobre todo, ricachón él, parecía muy contento de tenerla a su lado, a Madelon, y venga desvivirse para agradarle. Venga buscar por toda la mesa más golosinas, sólo para ella, que estaba dándose una panzada, de nata. Por lo que decía, era viudo, el suegro. ¡Menudo si lo había olvidado! Al cabo de poco, con los licores, Madelon tenía una curda de cuidado. El traje que llevaba Robinson y el mío también chorreaban fatiga y temporadas y más temporadas, pero en el refugio en que nos encontrábamos podía ser que no se viera. De todos modos, yo me sentía un poco humillado en medio de los demás, tan respetables en todo, limpios como americanos, tan bien lavados, tan bien educados, listos para concursos de elegancia.

Madelon, ya piripi, no se contenía demasiado bien. Con su fino perfil puntiagudo dirigido a las pinturas, contaba tonterías; la anfitriona, que se daba cuenta un poco, volvió al acordeón para remediarlo, mientras todos cantaban y nosotros también en sordina, pero desafinando y sin gracia, la misma canción que un poco antes oíamos fuera y después otra.

Robinson había encontrado el medio de entablar conversación con un señor anciano que parecía conocerlo todo sobre la cultura del cacao. Tema apropiado. Un colonial, dos coloniales. «Cuando estaba yo en África -oí,

para mi gran sorpresa, afirmar a Robinson-, cuando era ingeniero agrónomo de la Compañía Porduriére -repetía-, ponía a cosechar a la población entera de una aldea… etc.» No podía verme, conque se despachaba a gusto… Con ganas… Falsos recuerdos… Deslumbraba al señor anciano… ¡Mentiras! Lo único que se le ocurría para ponerse a la altura del anciano competente. Él siempre tan reservado, Robinson, en su lenguaje, me irritaba y afligía al divagar así.

Lo habían instalado, con todos los honores, en un gran diván lleno de perfumes, con una copa de coñac en la mano derecha, mientras que con la otra evocaba con gestos ampulosos la majestad de las junglas vírgenes y los furores de los tornados ecuatoriales. Estaba disparado, disparado de lo lindo… Alcide se habría tronchado de risa, si hubiera estado allí, en un rincón. ¡Pobre Alcide!

No se puede negar, estábamos lo que se dice a gusto, en su gabarra. Sobre todo porque empezaba a alzarse una brisita del río y en los marcos de las ventanas flotaban los visillos encañonados como banderitas alegres.

Otra ronda de helados y después champán. Era su santo, lo había repetido cien veces, el patrón. Se había propuesto obsequiar por una vez a todos e incluso a los transeúntes. A nosotros por una vez. Durante una hora, dos, tres tal vez, estaríamos todos reconciliados bajo su batuta, seríamos todos amigos, los conocidos y los demás e incluso los extraños, e incluso nosotros tres, a quienes habían recogido en la ribera, a falta de algo mejor, para no ser trece a la mesa. Iba a ponerme a cantar mi cancioncilla de alborozo y después cambié de parecer, demasiado orgulloso de pronto, consciente. Conque me pareció oportuno revelarles, para justificar mi invitación, pese a todo, en un arranque impulsivo, ¡que acababan de invitar en mi persona a uno de los médicos más distinguidos de la región parisina! ¡No podía sospecharlo, aquella gente, por mi pinta, evidentemente! ¡Ni por la mediocridad de mis compañeros! Pero, en cuanto supieron mi rango, se declararon encantados, halagados y, sin más tardar, todos y cada uno se pusieron a iniciarme en las desdichas particulares de su cuerpo; aproveché para aproximarme a la hija de un empresario, una primita muy robusta que padecía precisamente urticaria y eructos agrios a la más mínima.

Cuando no estás acostumbrado a los primores de la mesa y del bienestar, te embriagan fácilmente. La verdad pierde el culo para abandonarte. Basta con muy poquito siempre para que te deje libre. No te aferras a la verdad. En esa abundancia repentina de placeres, eres, antes de que te des cuenta, presa del delirio megalómano. Yo me puse a divagar, a mi vez, mientras hablaba de urticaria a la primita. Sales de las humillaciones cotidianas intentando, como Robinson, ponerte en consonancia con los ricos, mediante las mentiras, monedas del pobre. A todos nos da vergüenza nuestra carne mal presentada, nuestra osamenta deficitaria. No podía decidirme a mostrarles mi verdad; era indigna de ellos, como mi trasero. Tenía que causar, a toda costa, buena impresión.

A sus preguntas me puse a responder con ocurrencias, como antes Robinson al anciano señor. ¡Me sentí, a mi vez, embargado por la soberbia!… ¡Que si mi numerosa clientela!… ¡Que si el exceso de trabajo!… Que si mi amigo Robinson… el ingeniero, que me había ofrecido hospitalidad en su hotelito tolosano…

Y es que, además, cuando ha comido y bebido bien, el anfitrión es fácil de convencer. ¡Por fortuna! ¡Todo cuela! Robinson me había precedido en la dicha furtiva de las trolas improvisadas; seguirlo no exigía ya apenas esfuerzo.

Con las gafas ahumadas que llevaba, Robinson, no se podía apreciar bien el estado de sus ojos. Atribuimos, generosos, su desgracia a la guerra. Desde ese momento, nos vimos acomodados, realzados social y patrióticamente hasta la altura de ellos, nuestros anfitriones, sorprendidos un poco, al principio, por la fantasía del marido, el pintor, a quien su situación de artista mundano forzaba, de todos modos, a algunas acciones insólitas de vez en cuando… Se pusieron, los invitados, a considerarnos de verdad a los tres de lo más amables e interesantes.

En su calidad de prometida, Madelon tal vez no desempeñara su papel todo lo púdicamente que requería la ocasión; excitaba a todo el mundo, incluidas las mujeres, hasta el punto de que yo me preguntaba si no iría a acabar todo aquello en una orgía. No. La conversación fue languideciendo, rota por el esfuerzo baboso de ir más allá de las palabras. No ocurrió nada.

Seguíamos aferrados a las frases y clavados a los cojines, muy atontados por el intento común de hacernos felices, más profunda, más calurosamente y aún un poco más, unos a otros, con el cuerpo ahíto, con el espíritu exclusivamente, haciendo todo lo posible para mantener todo el placer del mundo en el presente, todo lo maravilloso que conocíamos en nosotros y en el mundo, para que el vecino empezara a disfrutarlo también y nos confesara, el vecino, que era eso, exacto, lo que buscaba, tan admirable, que sólo le faltaba esa dádiva nuestra precisamente, desde hacía tantos y tantos años, para ser por fin perfectamente feliz, ¡y para siempre! ¡Que por fin le habíamos revelado su propia razón de ser! Y que había que ir a decírselo a todo el mundo entonces, ¡que había encontrado su razón de ser! ¡Y que bebiéramos otra copa juntos para festejar y celebrar aquella delectación y que durase siempre así! ¡Que no cambiáramos nunca más de encanto! ¡Que sobre todo no volviéramos a los tiempos abominables, a los tiempos sin milagros, a los tiempos de antes de conocernos!… ¡Todos juntos en adelante! ¡Por fin! ¡Siempre!…

El patrón, por su parte, no pudo por menos de romper el encanto.

Tenía la manía de hablarnos de su pintura, que lo traía por la calle de la amargura, de sus cuadros, a todo trance y con cualquier motivo. Así, por su imbecilidad obstinada, aun ebrios, la trivialidad volvió a embargarnos, abrumadora. Vencido ya, fui a dirigirle algunos cumplidos muy sinceros y resplandecientes, al patrón, felicidad en frases para los artistas. Eso era lo que necesitaba. En cuanto los hubo recibido, mis

cumplidos, fue como un coito. Se dejó caer en uno de los sofás hinchados de a bordo y se quedó dormido en seguida, muy a gusto, feliz evidentemente. Los invitados, entretanto, se acariciaban mutuamente las facciones con miradas plomizas y mutuamente fascinadas, indecisos entre el sueño casi invencible y las delicias de una digestión milagrosa.

Yo, por mi parte, economicé ese deseo de dormitar y me lo reservé para la noche. Los miedos, supervivientes de la jornada, alejan demasiado a menudo el sueño y, cuando tienes la potra de hacerte, mientras puedes, con una pequeña provisión de beatitud, habrías de ser muy imbécil para desperdiciarla en fútiles cabezadas previas. ¡Todo para la noche! ¡Es mi lema! Hay que pensar todo el tiempo en la noche. Y, además, que estábamos invitados también para la cena, era el momento de recuperar el apetito…

Aprovechamos el sopor reinante para escabullimos. Realizamos los tres una salida de lo más discreta, evitando a los invitados adormecidos y agradablemente desparramados en torno al acordeón de la patrona. Los ojos de ésta, dulcificados por la música, pestañeaban en busca de la sombra. «Hasta luego», nos dijo, cuando pasamos junto a ella y su sonrisa se acabó en un sueño.

No fuimos demasiado lejos, los tres, sólo hasta el lugar que yo había descubierto, en que el río hacía un recodo entre dos filas de álamos, altos álamos muy puntiagudos. Se veía desde allí todo el valle e incluso el pueblecito, a lo lejos, en su hueco, arrugado en torno al campanario plantado como un claro en el rojo del cielo.

«¿A qué hora tenemos un tren para volver?», se inquietó al instante Madelon.

«¡No te preocupes! – la tranquilizó él-. Nos van a acompañar en coche, así hemos quedado… Lo ha dicho el patrón… Tienen coche…»

Madelon no volvió a insistir. Seguía ensimismada de placer. Una jornada de verdad excelente.

«Y tus ojos, Léon, ¿qué tal?», le preguntó entonces.

«Mucho mejor. No quería decirte nada aún, porque no estaba seguro, pero creo que sobre todo con el izquierdo empiezo a poder contar incluso las botellas sobre la mesa… He bebido de lo lindo, ¿te has fijado? ¡Y estaba bueno!…»

«El izquierdo es el lado del corazón», observó Madelon, dichosa. Estaba muy contenta, es comprensible, de que mejoraran los ojos de él.

«¡Bésame, entonces, y déjame besarte!» le propuso él. Yo empezaba a sentirme de sobra junto a sus efusiones. Sin embargo, me resultaba difícil alejarme, porque no sabía bien por dónde irme. Hice como que iba a hacer una necesidad detrás del árbol, en espera de que se les pasara. Eran cosas tiernas las que se decían. Yo los oía. Los diálogos de amor más insulsos son siempre, de todos modos, un poco graciosos, cuando conoces a las personas. Y, además, que nunca les había oído decir cosas así.

«¿Es verdad que me quieres?» le preguntaba ella.

«¡Tanto como a mis ojos!», le respondía él.

«¡No es poco lo que acabas de decir, Léon!… Pero, ¡aún no me has visto, Léon!… Tal vez cuando me veas con tus propios ojos y no sólo con los de los demás, ya no me quieras… Entonces volverás a ver a las otras mujeres y a lo mejor las amarás a todas… ¿Como tus amigos?…»

Esa observación, como quien no quiere la cosa, iba por mí. No me equivocaba yo… Creía que estaba lejos y no podía oírla… Así, que echó el resto… No perdía el tiempo… Él, el amigo, se puso a protestar. «Pero, ¡bueno!…», decía. ¡Y que si todo eso eran simples suposiciones! Calumnias…

«Yo, Madelon, ¡ni mucho menos! – se defendía-. ¡Yo no soy de ese estilo! ¿Qué es lo que te hace pensar que soy como él?… ¿Con lo buena que has sido conmigo, además?… ¡Yo me encariño! ¡Yo no soy un cabrón! Es para siempre, ya te lo he dicho, ¡sólo tengo una palabra! ¡Es para siempre! Tú eres bonita, ya lo sé, pero lo serás aún más cuando te haya visto… ¿Qué? ¿Estás contenta ahora? ¿Ya no lloras? ¡Más que eso no puedo decirte!»

«¡Eso sí que es bonito, Léon!», le respondía ella entonces, al tiempo que se apretaba contra él. Estaban haciéndose juramentos, ya no había quien los detuviese, el cielo no era ya bastante grande.

«Me gustaría que fueses siempre feliz conmigo… -le decía él, muy dulce, después-. Que no tuvieras nada que hacer y que tuvieses, sin embargo, todo lo que necesitaras…»

«¡Ah, qué bueno eres, Léon! Eres mejor de lo que pensaba… ¡Eres tierno! ¡Eres fiel! ¡Todo lo mejorcito!…»

«Es porque te adoro, cariñito mío…»

Y se excitaban aún más, con magreos. Y después, como para mantenerme alejado de su felicidad, volvían a dejarme como un trapo a mí.

Primero ella. «El doctor, tu amigo, es simpático, ¿verdad? – Volvía a la carga, como si no hubiera podido tragarme-. ¡Es simpático!… No quiero hablar mal de él, ya que es un amigo tuyo… Pero es un hombre que parece brutal, de todos modos, con las mujeres… No quiero hablar mal de él, porque creo que es verdad que te aprecia. Pero, en fin, no es mi estilo… Voy a decirte una cosa… No te enfadarás, ¿verdad? – No, no se enfadaba por nada, Léon-. Pues mira, me parece que le gustan, al doctor, como demasiado, las mujeres… Como los perros un poco, ¿me comprendes?… ¿No te parece a ti?… ¡Es como si les saltara encima, parece, siempre! Hace daño y se va… ¿No te parece? ¿Que es así?»

Le parecía, al cabronazo, le parecía todo lo que ella quisiese, le parecía incluso que lo que ella decía era de lo más exacto y gracioso. De lo más divertido. La animaba a continuar, se relamía de gusto.

«Sí, es muy cierto, eso que has notado en él, Madelon; es buena persona, Ferdinand, pero lo que se dice

delicadeza no es que tenga, eso desde luego, y fidelidad tampoco, por cierto… ¡De eso estoy seguro!…»

«Has debido de conocerle amigas, ¿eh, Léon?»

Se informaba, la muy puta.

«¡La tira! – le respondió él, convencido-. Pero es que… mira… Para empezar… ¡No es exigente!…»

Había que sacar una conclusión de esas afirmaciones, de lo cual se encargó Madelon.

«Los médicos, ya es sabido, son todos unos guarros… La mayoría de las veces… Pero es que él, ¡me parece que es cosa mala en ese estilo!…»

«Ni que lo jures -aprobó él, mi buen, mi feliz amigo, y continuó-: Hasta tal punto, que muchas veces he pensado, de tan aficionado que lo he visto a eso, que tomaba drogas… Y, además, ¡es que tiene un aparato! ¡Si vieras qué tamaño! ¡No es natural…!»

«¡Ah, ah! – dijo Madelon, perpleja de pronto e intentando recordar mi aparato-. ¿Tú crees que tendrá enfermedades entonces?» Estaba muy inquieta, afligida de repente por esas informaciones íntimas.

«Eso no sé -se vio obligado a reconocer él, con pena-, no puedo asegurarlo… Pero no me extrañaría con la vida que lleva.»

«De todos modos, tienes razón, debe de tomar drogas… Debe de ser por eso por lo que es tan extraño a veces…»

Y de repente la cabecita de Madelon se puso a cavilar. Añadió: «En el futuro tendremos que desconfiar un poco de él…»

«¿No tendrás miedo, de todos modos? – le preguntó él-. No es nada tuyo, al menos… ¿No se te habrá insinuado?»

«Ah, eso no, vamos, ¡me habría negado! Pero nunca se sabe lo que se le puede ocurrir… Suponte, por ejemplo, que le da un ataque… ¡Les dan ataques, a esa gente que toma drogas!… Desde luego, ¡no sería yo quien fuera a su consulta!…»

«¡Yo tampoco, ahora que lo dices!», aprobó Robinson. Y más ternura y caricias…

«¡Cielito!… ¡Cielito mío!…» Lo acunaba…

«¡Mi niña!… ¡Mi niña!…», le respondía él. Y después silencios interrumpidos por arranques de besos.

«Dime en seguida que me quieres todas las veces que puedas, mientras te beso hasta el hombro…»

Empezaba en el cuello el jueguecito.

«¡Qué sofocada estoy!… -exclamaba ella resoplando-. ¡Me asfixio! ¡Dame aire!» Pero él no la dejaba respirar. Volvía a empezar. Yo, en el césped de al lado, intentaba ver lo que iba a ocurrir. Él le cogía los pezones entre los labios y jugueteaba con ellos. Jueguecitos, vamos. Yo también estaba sofocadísimo, embargado por un montón de emociones y maravillado, además, de mi indiscreción.

«Vamos a ser muy felices, ¿eh? Dime, Léon. Dime que estás bien seguro de que vamos a ser felices.»

Eso era el entreacto. Y después más proyectos para el futuro que no acababan nunca, como para rehacer todo un mundo con ellos, pero un mundo sólo para ellos dos, ¡ya lo creo! Fuera yo, sobre todo, de él. Parecía que no pudiesen acabar nunca de deshacerse de mí, de despejar su intimidad de mi asquerosa evocación.

«¿Hace mucho que sois amigos, Ferdinand y tú?»

Eso la inquietaba…

«Años, sí… Aquí… Allá… -respondió él-. Nos conocimos por casualidad, en los viajes… Él es un tipo al que le gusta conocer países,… A mí también, en cierto sentido, conque es como si hubiéramos viajado juntos desde hace mucho… ¿Comprendes?…» Reducía así nuestra vida a trivialidades ínfimas.

«Bueno, pues, ¡vais a tener que dejar de ser tan amiguitos, cariño! ¡Y desde ahora, además!… -le respondió ella, muy decidida, rotunda-. ¡Esto se va a acabar!… ¿Verdad, cariño, que se va a acabar?… Conmigo solita vas a viajar tú ahora… ¿Me has entendido?… ¿Eh, cariño?…»

«Entonces, ¿estás celosa de él?», preguntó un poco desconcertado, de todos modos, el muy gilipollas.

«¡No! No estoy celosa de él, pero te quiero demasiado, verdad, Léon mío, quiero tenerte enterito para mí… No quiero compartirte con nadie… Y, además, es que ahora que yo te quiero, Léon mío, no es la clase de compañía que necesitas… Es demasiado vicioso… ¿Comprendes? ¡Dime que me adoras, Léon! ¡Y que me entiendes!»

«Te adoro.»

«Bien.»

Volvimos todos a Toulouse, aquella misma noche.

Dos días después se produjo el accidente. Tenía que marcharme, de todos modos, y, justo cuando estaba acabando la maleta para irme a la estación, oí a alguien gritar algo delante de la casa. Escuché… Tenía que bajar corriendo al panteón… Yo no veía a la persona que me llamaba así… Pero por el tono de voz debía de ser pero que muy urgente… Era urgente que acudiera, al parecer.

«¿No puedo esperar ni un minuto?», respondí, para no precipitarme… Debía de ser hacia las seis, justo antes de cenar íbamos a despedirnos en la estación, así habíamos quedado. Nos iba bien a todos así, porque la vieja tenía que volver un poco después a casa. Precisamente esa noche, por un grupo de peregrinos que esperaba en el panteón.

«¡Venga rápido, doctor!… -insistía la persona de la calle-. ¡Acaba de ocurrir una desgracia a la Sra. Henrouille!»

«¡Bueno, bueno!… -dije-. ¡Voy en seguida! ¡Entendido!… ¡Bajo ahora mismo!»

Pero para tener tiempo de serenarme un poco: «Vaya usted delante -añadí-. Dígales que ya llego… Que voy corriendo… El tiempo de ponerme los pantalones…»

«Pero, ¡es que es muy urgente! – insistía aún la persona-. ¡Le repito que ha perdido el conocimiento!… ¡Se ha abierto la cabeza, al parecer!… ¡Se ha caído por las escaleras del panteón!… ¡Rodando hasta abajo ha caído!…»

«¡Listo!», me dije para mis adentros al oír aquella bonita historia y no necesité pensarlo más. Me largué, derechito, a la estación. No necesitaba saber más.

Cogí el tren de las 7.15, a pesar de todo, pero por los pelos.

No nos despedimos.

A Parapine lo que le pareció, ante todo, al volver a verme, fue que yo tenía mala cara.

«Debiste de cansarte mucho en Toulouse», observó, receloso, como siempre.

Es cierto que habíamos tenido emociones allá, en Toulouse, pero en fin, no había por qué quejarse, ya que me había librado de una buena, eso esperaba al menos, de los líos de verdad, al largarme en el momento crítico.

Conque le expliqué la aventura con detalle y también mis sospechas, a Parapine. Pero no le parecía ni mucho menos que yo hubiera actuado con demasiado acierto en aquella ocasión… De todos modos, no tuvimos tiempo de discutir el asunto, porque la cuestión de conseguir un currelo para mí se había vuelto en aquel momento tan urgente, que no podía pensar en otra cosa. No había, pues, tiempo que perder en comentarios… Ya sólo me quedaban ciento cincuenta francos de economías y no sabía adonde ir ya a colocarme. ¿En el Tarapout?… Ya no contrataban a nadie. La crisis. ¿Volver a La Garenne-Rancy, entonces? ¿Volver a probar con la clientela? Lo pensé, desde luego, por un momento, pese a todo, pero como último recurso y de muy mala gana. Nada se apaga como un fuego sagrado.

Fue él, Parapine, quien me echó al final un buen cable con una modesta plaza que descubrió para mí en un manicomio, precisamente, donde trabajaba desde hacía ya unos meses.

Las cosas iban aún bastante bien. En aquel manicomio, Parapine se ocupaba no sólo de llevar a los alienados al cine, sino también del tratamiento eléctrico. A horas determinadas, dos veces por semana, desencadenaba auténticas tormentas magnéticas por encima de las cabezas de los melancólicos reunidos a propósito en una habitación cerrada y muy obscura. Deporte mental, en una palabra, y la realización de la hermosa idea del doctor Baryton, su patrón. Roñoso él, por cierto, el compadre, que me admitió a cambio de un salario mínimo, pero con un contrato y cláusulas así de largas, todas ventajosas para él, evidentemente. Un patrono, en una palabra.

La remuneración en aquel manicomio era mínima, cierto es, pero, en cambio, la alimentación era bastante buena y el alojamiento perfecto. También podíamos tirarnos a las enfermeras. Estaba permitido y reconocido tácitamente. Baryton, el patrón, no tenía nada en contra de esas diversiones e incluso había comentado que esas facilidades eróticas mantenían el apego del personal a la casa. Ni tonto ni severo.

Y, además, que no era el momento de poner, para empezar, pegas ni condiciones, cuando me ofrecían un filete, que me venía más que de perilla. Pensándolo bien, yo no lograba comprender del todo por qué me había dado Parapine de repente muestras de tan vivo interés. Su actitud para conmigo me inquietaba. Atribuirle a él, a Parapine, sentimientos fraternos… Era demasiado bello, la verdad, para ser cierto… Debía de ser algo más complicado. Pero todo llega…

A mediodía nos encontrábamos a la mesa, era la costumbre, reunidos en torno a Baryton, nuestro patrón, alienista veterano, barba en punta, muslos cortos y carnosos, muy amable, asuntos económicos aparte, capítulo a propósito del cual se mostraba, de lo más asqueroso cada vez que le proporcionábamos pretexto y ocasión.

Tocante a tallarines y vinos ásperos, nos mimaba, desde luego. Según nos explicó, había heredado todo un viñedo. ¡Peor para nosotros! Era un vino muy modesto, lo aseguro.

Su manicomio de Vigny-sur-Seine estaba siempre lleno. Lo llamaban «Casa de salud» en los anuncios, por un gran jardín que lo rodeaba, donde nuestros locos se paseaban los días en que hacía bueno. Se paseaban por él, los locos, con aspecto de mantener con dificultad la cabeza en equilibrio sobre los hombros, como, si tuvieran miedo constantemente de que se les desparramara por el suelo, el contenido, al tropezar. Ahí dentro se entrechocaban toda clase de cosas saltarinas y extravagantes, a las que se sentían horriblemente apegados.

No nos hablaban de sus tesoros mentales, los alienados, sino con infinidad de contorsiones espantadas o aires condescendientes y protectores, al modo de administradores meticulosos y prepotentes. Ni por un imperio se habría podido sacarlos de sus cabezas. Un loco no es sino las ideas corrientes de un hombre pero bien encerradas en una cabeza. El mundo no pasa a través de su cabeza y se acabó. Se vuelve como un lago sin ribera, una cabeza cerrada, una infección.

Baryton se abastecía de tallarines y legumbres en París, al por mayor. Por eso, no nos apreciaban nada los comerciantes de Vigny-sur-Seine. Nos tenían fila incluso, los comerciantes, estaba más claro que el agua. No nos quitaba el apetito, aquella animosidad. En la mesa, al comienzo de mi período de prueba, Baryton sacaba sin falta las conclusiones y la filosofía de nuestras deshilvanadas conversaciones. Pero, por haberse pasado la vida entre los alienados, ganándose las habichuelas con aquel tráfico, compartiendo su rancho, neutralizando mal que bien sus insanias, nada le parecía más aburrido que tener, además, que hablar a veces de sus manías durante nuestras comidas. «¡No deben figurar en las conversaciones de la gente normal!», afirmaba defensivo

y perentorio. Personalmente, se atenía a esa higiene mental.

A él le gustaba la conversación y de modo casi inquieto, le gustaba divertida y sobre todo tranquilizadora y muy sensata. Sobre los chiflados no deseaba explayarse. Una antipatía instintiva hacia ellos le bastaba y le sobraba. En cambio, nuestros relatos de viajes le encantaban. Nunca se cansaba de oírlos. Parapine, desde mi llegada, se vio liberado de su cháchara. Yo había venido al pelo para distraer a nuestro patrón durante las comidas. Todas mis peregrinaciones salieron a colación, relatadas por extenso, retocadas, por supuesto, literaturizadas como Dios manda, agradables. Baryton, al comer, hacía, con la lengua y la boca, mucho ruido. Su hija se mantenía siempre a su diestra. Pese a contar sólo diez años, parecía ya marchita para siempre, su hija Aimée. Algo inanimado, una tez grisácea incurable desdibujaba a Aimée ante nuestra vista, como si nubéculas malsanas le pasaran de continuo por delante de la cara.

Entre Parapine y Baryton surgían pequeños roces. Sin embargo, Baryton no guardaba el menor rencor a nadie, siempre que no se inmiscuyera en los beneficios de su empresa. Sus cuentas constituyeron durante mucho tiempo el único aspecto sagrado de su existencia.

Un día, Parapine, en la época en que aún le hablaba, le había declarado con toda crudeza en la mesa que carecía de ética. Al principio, esa observación lo había ofendido, a Baryton. Y después todo se había arreglado. No se enfada uno por tan poca cosa. Con el relato de mis viajes Baryton experimentaba no sólo una emoción novelesca, sino también la sensación de hacer economías. «Después de haberlo oído a usted, Ferdinand, con lo bien que lo cuenta, ¡ya no le quedan a uno ganas de ir a verlos, esos países!» No podía ocurrírsele un cumplido más amable. En su manicomio se recibía sólo a los locos fáciles de vigilar, nunca a los alienados muy aviesos y de claras tendencias homicidas. Su manicomio no era un lugar siniestro en absoluto. Pocas rejas, sólo algunas celdas. El asunto más inquietante era tal vez, de entre todos, la pequeña Aimée, su propia hija. No se contaba entre los enfermos, la niña, pero el ambiente la atormentaba.

Algunos alaridos, de vez en cuando, llegaban hasta nuestro comedor, pero el origen de esos gritos era siempre bastante fútil. Duraban poco, por lo demás. Observábamos también largas y bruscas oleadas de frenesí, que sacudían de vez en cuando a los grupos de alienados, por un quítame allá esas pajas, durante sus interminables paseos entre los bosquecillos y los macizos de begonias. Acababan sin demasiados cuentos ni alarmas con baños calientes tibios y damajuanas de tebaína.

A las escasas ventanas de los refectorios que daban a la calle iban los locos a veces a gritar y alborotar al vecindario, pero el horror se les quedaba más bien en el interior. Conservaban y se ocupaban personalmente de su horror, contra nuestras empresas terapéuticas. Les apasionaba, esa resistencia.

Al pensar ahora en todos los locos que conocí en casa del tío Baryton, no puedo por menos de poner en duda que existan otras realizaciones auténticas de nuestros temperamentos profundos que la guerra y la enfermedad, infinitos de pesadilla.

La gran fatiga de la existencia tal vez no sea, en una palabra, sino ese enorme esfuerzo que realizamos para seguir siendo veinte años, cuarenta, más aún, razonables, para no ser simple, profundamente nosotros mismos, es decir, inmundos, atroces, absurdos. La pesadilla de tener que presentar siempre como un ideal universal, superhombre de la mañana a la noche, el subhombre claudicante que nos dieron.

Enfermos teníamos de todos los precios en el manicomio y los más opulentos vivían en habitaciones Luis XV bien acolchadas. A éstos Baryton les hacía la visita diaria de alto precio. Ellos lo esperaban. De vez en cuando recibía un par de señoras bofetadas, Baryton, formidables, la verdad, largo tiempo meditadas. En seguida las apuntaba a la cuenta en concepto de tratamiento especial.

En la mesa Parapine se mantenía reservado; no es que mis éxitos oratorios ante Baryton lo hirieran ni mucho menos; al contrario, parecía bastante menos preocupado que antes, en la época de los microbios, y, en definitiva, casi contento. Conviene observar que había pasado un miedo de aúpa con sus historias de menores. Seguía un poco desconcertado respecto al sexo. En las horas libres vagaba por el césped del manicomio, también él, como un enfermo, y, cuando yo pasaba junto a él, me dirigía sonrisitas, pero tan indecisas, tan pálidas, aquellas sonrisas, que se podrían haber considerado despedidas.

Al admitirnos a los dos en su personal técnico, Baryton hacía una buena adquisición, ya que le habíamos aportado no sólo la entrega de todo nuestro tiempo, sino también distracción y ecos de aventuras a las que era muy aficionado y de las que se veía privado. Por eso, con frecuencia tenía el gusto de manifestarnos su contento. No obstante, expresaba algunas reservas respecto a Parapine.

Nunca se había sentido del todo cómodo con Parapine. «Mire usted, Ferdinand… -me dijo un día, confidencial-, ¡es ruso!» Ser ruso, para Baryton, era algo tan descriptivo, tan morfológico, irremisible, como «diabético» o «negro». Lanzado a propósito de ese tema, que lo ponía nervioso desde hacía muchos meses, se puso a cavilar de lo lindo ante mí y para mí… Yo no lo reconocía, a Baryton. Precisamente íbamos juntos al estanco del pueblo a buscar cigarrillos.

«Parapine me parece, verdad, Ferdinand, de lo más inteligente, eso desde luego… Pero, de todos modos, ¡tiene una inteligencia enteramente arbitraria, ese muchacho! ¿No le parece a usted, Ferdinand?» «En primer lugar, no quiere adaptarse… Se le nota en seguida… Ni siquiera está a gusto con su trabajo… ¡Ni siquiera está a gusto en este mundo!… ¡Reconózcalo!… ¡Y en eso se equivoca! ¡Completamente!… ¡Porque sufre!… ¡Ésa es la prueba! ¡Mire cómo me adapto yo, Ferdinand!…» (Se daba golpes en el esternón). «¿Que mañana la tierra se pone a girar en sentido contrario? Bueno, pues, ¡yo me adaptaré, Ferdinand! Y, además, ¡en seguida! ¿Y sabe usted cómo, Ferdinand? Dormiré de un tirón doce horas más, ¡y listo! ¡Y se acabó! ¡Hale! ¡Es así de

sencillo! ¡Y ya estará hecho! ¡Estaré adaptado! Mientras que ese Parapine, ¿sabe usted lo que hará en semejante aventura? ¡Rumiará proyectos y amarguras durante cien años más!… ¡Estoy seguro! ¡Se lo digo yo!… ¿Acaso no es verdad? ¡Perderá el sueño porque la tierra gire en sentido contrario!… ¡Le parecerá yo qué sé qué injusticia especial!… ¡Demasiada injusticia!… ¡Es su manía, por cierto, la injusticia!… Me hablaba y no paraba, de la injusticia, en la época en que se dignaba dirigirme la palabra… ¿Y cree usted que se contentará con lloriquear? ¡Eso sólo sería un mal menor!… Pero, ¡no! ¡Buscará en seguida un medio de hacer saltar la tierra! ¡Para vengarse, Ferdinand! Y lo peor, se lo voy a decir yo, Ferdinand, lo peor… Pero que esto quede entre nosotros… Pues, bien, es que lo encontrará, ¡el medio!… ¡Como se lo digo yo! ¡Ah! Mire, Ferdinand, intente comprender bien lo que voy a explicarle… Existe una clase de locos simples y otra clase, los torturados por la manía de la civilización… ¡Me horroriza pensar que Parapine sea uno de éstos!… ¿Sabe usted lo que me dijo un día?»

«No, señor…»

«Pues me dijo: "¡Entre el pene y las matemáticas, señor Baryton, no existe nada! ¡Nada! ¡El vacío!" Y agárrese… ¿Sabe usted a qué está esperando para volver a hablarme?»

«No, señor Baryton, no tengo la menor idea…»

«Entonces, ¿no se lo ha contado?»

«No, aún no…»

«Pues a mí sí que me lo ha dicho… ¡Espera el advenimiento de la era de las matemáticas! ¡Sencillamente! ¡Está absolutamente decidido! ¿Qué le parece ese impertinente comportamiento hacia mí? ¿Que soy mayor que él? ¿Su jefe?…»

No me quedaba más remedio que echarme a reír un poquito ante tal fantasía exorbitante. Pero a Baryton no le parecía broma. Encontraba motivos incluso para indignarse por muchas otras cosas…

«¡Ah, Ferdinand! Ya veo que todo esto le parece anodino… Palabras inocentes, cuentos extravagantes entre tantos otros… Esa parece ser la conclusión de usted… Eso sólo, ¿verdad?… ¡Oh, imprudente Ferdinand! Al contrario, ¡permítame ponerlo en guardia contra esos extravíos, fútiles sólo en apariencia! ¡Está usted totalmente equivocado!… ¡Totalmente!… ¡Mil veces, en verdad!… A lo largo de mi carrera, ¡convendrá usted en que he oído casi todo lo que se puede oír, aquí y en otros sitios, en cuestión de delirios de todas clases! ¡No me he perdido ni uno!… No me lo va usted a negar, ¿verdad, Ferdinand?… Y yo no doy la impresión de ser propenso a las angustias, como no habrá usted dejado de observar, Ferdinand… Ni a las exageraciones… ¿No es así? Ante mi juicio, muy poca es la fuerza de una palabra e incluso de varias palabras, ¡e incluso de frases y discursos enteros!… Soy bastante sencillo de nacimiento y por naturaleza, ¡y no se me puede negar que soy uno de esos seres humanos a quienes las palabras no dan miedo!… Bueno, pues, tras un análisis concienzudo, Ferdinand, ¡me he visto obligado, en relación con Parapine, a mantenerme en guardia!… Formular las más claras reservas… Su extravagancia no se parece a ninguna de las inofensivas y corrientes… Pertenece más bien, me ha parecido, a una de las raras formas temibles de originalidad, a una de esas manías fácilmente contagiosas: ¡sociales y triunfantes, en una palabra!… Tal vez no se trate aún de locura del todo en el caso de su amigo… ¡No! Tal vez sólo sea convicción exagerada… Pero yo me conozco el percal, tocante a demencias contagiosas… ¡Nada es más grave que la convicción exagerada!… ¡He conocido muchos, Ferdinand, de esa clase de convencidos y de diversas procedencias, además!… ¡Los que hablan de justicia me han parecido, en definitiva, los más fanáticos!… Al principio, esos justicieros me interesaron un poco, lo confieso… Ahora me ponen negro, me irritan a más no poder, esos maníacos… ¿Opina usted igual?… Descubre uno en los hombres no sé qué facilidad de transmisión por ese lado que me espanta y en todos los hombres, ¿me oye usted?… ¡Fíjese, Ferdinand! ¡En todos! Como con el alcohol o el erotismo… La misma predisposición… La misma fatalidad… Infinitamente extendida… ¿Se ríe usted, Ferdinand? ¡Ahora me espanta usted también! ¡Frágil! ¡Vulnerable! ¡Inconsistente! ¡Peligroso Ferdinand! ¡Cuando pienso que me parecía usted serio!… No olvide que soy viejo, Ferdinand, ¡podría permitirme el lujo de cachondearme del porvenir! ¡Me estaría permitido! Pero, ¡usted!»

En principio, para siempre y en todas las cosas yo opinaba igual que mi patrón. No había hecho grandes progresos prácticos a lo largo de mi aperreada existencia, pero había aprendido, de todos modos, los principios adecuados de etiqueta propios de la servidumbre. Gracias a esas disposiciones, Baryton y yo nos habíamos hecho muy amigos en seguida, yo nunca le contrariaba, comía poco en la mesa. Un ayudante simpático, en una palabra, de lo más económico y nada ambicioso, nada amenazador.

Vigny-sur-Seine se presenta entre dos esclusas, entre sus dos oteros desprovistos de vegetación, es un pueblo que se transforma en suburbio. París va a absorberlo.

Pierde un jardín por mes. La publicidad, desde la entrada, lo vuelve abigarrado como un ballet ruso. La hija del ordenanza sabe hacer cócteles. Sólo el tranvía se empeña en pasar a la historia, no se irá sin revolución. La gente está inquieta, los hijos ya no tienen el mismo acento que sus padres. Te encuentras como incómodo, al pensarlo, de ser aún de Seine-et-Oise. Se está produciendo el milagro. El último parterre desapareció con la llegada de Laval al Ministerio y las asistentas cobran veinte céntimos más por hora desde las vacaciones. Se ha establecido un *bookmaker*. La empleada de la estafeta de correos compra novelas pederásticas e imagina otras mucho más realistas. El cura dice «mierda» cada dos por tres y da consejos sobre la Bolsa a los que son buenos. El Sena ha matado sus peces y se americaniza entre una fila doble de volquetes-tractores-remolcadores que le forman al ras de las riberas una terrible dentadura postiza de basuras y

chatarra. Tres corredores de terrenos acaban de ir a la cárcel. Nos vamos organizando.

Esa transformación local del terreno no pasó inadvertida a Baryton. Lamentaba con amargura que no se le hubiera ocurrido comprar otros terrenos más en el valle contiguo veinte años antes, cuando aún te rogaban que te los quedaras por veinte céntimos el metro, como una tarta rancia. Los buenos tiempos pasados. Por fortuna, su Instituto Psicoterapéutico se defendía aún muy bien. Pero no sin problemas. Las insaciables familias no cesaban de reclamarle, de exigirle, una y mil veces sistemas más modernos de cura, más eléctricos, más misteriosos, más todo… Mecanismos más modernos sobre todo, aparatos más impresionantes y al minuto, además, y no le quedaba más remedio que adoptarlos, so pena de verse superado por la competencia… por esas casas similares emboscadas en los oquedales vecinos de Asniéres, Passy, Montretout, al acecho, también ellas, de todos los viejos chochos de lujo.

Se apresuraba, Baryton, guiado por Parapine, a adaptarse al gusto del momento, al mejor precio, por supuesto, en rebajas, en tiendas de ocasión, en saldos, pero sin cesar, a base de nuevos artefactos eléctricos, pneumáticos, hidráulicos, a fin de parecer así cada vez mejor equipado para correr tras las chifladuras de los quisquillosos y acaudalados internos. Gemía por verse obligado a utilizar esos aparatos inútiles… a granjearse el favor de los propios locos…

«Cuando abrí mi manicomio -me confiaba un día, desahogándose por sus pesares- era justo antes de la Exposición, la grande… Éramos, constituíamos, los alienistas, un número muy limitado de facultativos y mucho menos curiosos y depravados que hoy, ¡le ruego que me crea!… Ninguno de nosotros intentaba entonces estar tan loco como el cliente… Aun no había aparecido la moda de delirar con el pretexto de curar mejor, moda obscena, fíjese, como casi todo lo que nos llega del extranjero…

»En los tiempos en que me inicié, los médicos franceses, Ferdinand, ¡aún se respetaban! No se creían obligados a desatinar al mismo tiempo que sus enfermos… ¿Para ponerse a tono seguramente?… ¿Qué sé yo? ¡Complacerlos! ¿Adonde nos va a conducir eso?… ¡Dígame usted!… A fuerza de ser más astutos, más mórbidos, más perversos que los perseguidos más transtornados de nuestros manicomios, de revolearnos con una especie de nuevo orgullo fangoso en todas las insanias que nos presentan, ¿adonde vamos?… ¿Está usted en condiciones de tranquilizarme, Ferdinand, sobre la suerte de nuestra razón?… ¿E incluso del simple sentido común?… A este ritmo, ¿qué nos va a quedar del sentido común? ¡Nada! ¡Es de prever! ¡Absolutamente nada! Puedo predecírselo… Es evidente…

»En primer lugar, Ferdinand, ¿es que ante una inteligencia realmente moderna no acaba todo valiendo lo mismo? ¡Ya no hay blanco! ¡Ni negro tampoco! ¡Todo se deshilacha!… ¡Es el nuevo estilo! ¡La moda! ¿Por qué, entonces, no volvernos locos nosotros mismos?… ¡Al instante! ¡Para empezar! ¡Y jactarnos de ello, además! ¡Proclamar el gran pitote espiritual! ¡Hacernos publicidad con nuestra demencia! ¿Quién puede contenernos? ¡Dígame, Ferdinand! ¿Algunos escrúpulos humanos, supremos y superfluos?… ¿Y qué insípidas timideces más? ¿Eh?… Mire, Ferdinand, cuando escucho a algunos de nuestros colegas y, fíjese bien, algunos de los más estimados, los más buscados por la clientela y las Academias, ¡llego a preguntarme adonde nos conducen!… ¡Es infernal, la verdad! ¡Esos insensatos me desconciertan, me angustian, me demonizan y sobre todo me asquean! Sólo de oírlos comunicar, durante uno de esos congresos modernos, los resultados de sus investigaciones familiares, ¡soy presa de un terror pánico, Ferdinand! Mi razón me traiciona sólo de escucharlos… Poseídos, viciosos, capciosos y marrulleros, esos favoritos de la psiquiatría reciente, a fuerza de análisis superconscientes nos precipitan a los abismos… ¡A los abismos, sencillamente! Una mañana, si no reaccionan ustedes, los jóvenes, vamos a pasar, entiéndame bien, Ferdinand, vamos a pasar… a fuerza de estirarnos, de sublimarnos, de calentarnos el entendimiento… al otro lado de la inteligencia, al lado infernal, ¡al lado del que no se vuelve!… Por lo demás, ¡parece como si ya estuvieran encerrados, esos listillos, en el sótano de los condenados, a fuerza de masturbarse el caletre día y noche!

»Digo bien, día y noche, ¡porque ya sabe usted, Ferdinand, que ya ni siquiera por la noche cesan de fornicarse en todos los sueños, esos asquerosos!… ¡Con eso está dicho todo!… ¡Y venga devanarse el caletre! ¡Y venga dilatarlo! ¡Y venga tiranizármelo!… Y ya no hay, a su alrededor, sino una bazofia asquerosa de desechos orgánicos, una papilla de síntomas de delirios en compota, que les chorrea y gotea por todos lados… Tenemos las manos pringadas de lo que queda del espíritu, pegajosas, estamos grotescos, de desprecio, de hedor. Todo va a desplomarse, Ferdinand, todo se desploma, se lo predigo yo, el viejo Baryton, ¡y dentro de muy poco!… ¡Y ya verá usted, Ferdinand, la inmensa desbandada! ¡Porque usted es joven aún! ¡Ya la verá!… ¡Ah! ¡Prepárese para los goces! ¡Pasarán todos ustedes a casa del vecino! ¡Hala! ¡De un buen ataque de delirio más! ¡Uno de más! ¡Y brum! ¡Derechitos al manicomio! ¡Por fin! ¡Se verán liberados, como dicen! ¡Hace mucho que los ha tentado demasiado! ¡Una audacia de aúpa va a ser! Pero, cuando estén en el manicomio, amigos míos, ¡les aseguro que se quedarán en él!

»Recuerde bien esto, Ferdinand, ¡el comienzo del fin de todo es la desmesura! Yo estoy en buenas condiciones de contarle cómo empezó la gran desbandada… ¡Por las fantasías desmesuradas comenzó! ¡Por las exageraciones extranjeras! ¡Ni mesura ni fuerza ya! ¡Estaba escrito! Entonces, ¿a la nada todo el mundo? ¿Por qué no? ¿Todos? ¡Pues claro que sí! Por lo demás, no es que vayamos, ¡es que corremos hacia ella! ¡Una auténtica avalancha! ¡Yo lo he visto, Ferdinand, el espíritu, ceder poco a poco su equilibrio y después disolverse en la gran empresa de las ambiciones apocalípticas! Eso comenzó hacia 1900… ¡Esa es la fecha! A partir de esa época, ya no hubo en el mundo en general y en la psiquiatría en particular sino una carrera frenética a ver quién se volvía más perverso, más salaz, más original, más repugnante, más creador, como

dicen, que el compañero… ¡Bonito batiburrillo!… ¡A ver quién se encomendaría lo más pronto posible al monstruo, a la bestia sin corazón y sin comedimiento!… Nos comerá a todos, la bestia, Ferdinand, ¡está claro y lo apruebo!… ¿La bestia? ¡Una gran cabeza que avanza como quiere!… ¡Sus guerras y sus babas llamean ya hacia nosotros y desde todas partes!… ¡Ya estamos en pleno diluvio! ¡Sencillamente! ¡Ah, nos aburríamos, al parecer, en el consciente! ¡Ya no nos aburriremos más! Empezamos a darnos por culo, para variar… Y entonces nos pusimos al instante a sentir las "impresiones" y las "intuiciones"… ¡Como mujeres!…

»Por lo demás, ¿acaso es necesario aún, en el extremo a que hemos llegado, molestarse en utilizar término tan traicionero como el de "lógica"?… ¡Pues claro que no! Más bien es como un estorbo, la lógica, ante sabios psicólogos infinitamente sutiles como los que nuestra época produce, progresistas de verdad… ¡No me atribuya usted por ello desprecio de las mujeres! ¡Ni mucho menos! ¡Bien lo sabe usted! Pero, ¡no me gustan sus impresiones! Yo soy un animal de testículos, Ferdinand, y, cuando tengo un hecho, me cuesta soltarlo… Hombre, mire, el otro día me ocurrió una buena en ese sentido… Me pidieron que ingresara a un escritor… Desatinaba, el escritor… ¿Sabe usted lo que gritaba desde hacía más de un mes? "¡Se liquida!… ¡Se liquida!…" ¡Así vociferaba, por toda la casa! Ése sí que sí… No había duda… ¡Había pasado al otro lado de la inteligencia!… Pero es que precisamente le costaba lo indecible liquidar… Un antiguo estrechamiento lo intoxicaba con orina, le atrancaba la vejiga… Yo no acababa nunca de sondarlo, de descargarle gota a gota… La familia insistía en que eso le venía, pese a todo, de su genio… De nada servía que les explicara, a la familia, que era más bien la vejiga la que tenía enferma, el escritor, seguían en sus trece… Para ellos, había sucumbido a un momento de exceso de genio y se acabó… No me quedó más remedio que adherirme a su opinión al final. Sabe usted, ¿verdad?, lo que es una familia. Imposible hacer comprender a una familia que un hombre, pariente o no, no es, al fin y al cabo, sino podredumbre en suspenso… Se negaría a pagar por una podredumbre en suspenso.»

Desde hacía más de veinte años, Baryton no acababa nunca de satisfacerlas en sus vanidades puntillosas, a las familias. Le amargaban la vida. Pese a ser paciente y muy equilibrado, tal como yo lo conocí, conservaba en el corazón un antiguo resto de odio muy rancio hacia las familias… En el momento en que yo vivía junto a él, estaba harto e intentaba en secreto y con tesón liberarse, substraerse, de una vez por todas de la tiranía de las familias, de un modo o de otro… Cada cual tiene sus razones para evadirse de su miseria íntima y cada uno de nosotros, para conseguirlo, saca de sus circunstancias un camino ingenioso. ¡Felices aquellos que tienen bastante con el burdel!

Parapine, por su parte, parecía feliz de haber elegido el camino del silencio. En cambio, Baryton, hasta más adelante no lo comprendí, se preguntaba en conciencia si conseguiría alguna vez deshacerse de las familias, de su sujeción, de las mil trivialidades repugnantes de la psiquiatría alimentaria, de su estado, en una palabra. Tenía tal deseo de cosas absolutamente nuevas y diferentes, que estaba maduro en el fondo para la huida y la evasión, lo que explica seguramente sus peroratas críticas… Su egoísmo reventaba bajo las rutinas. Ya no podía sublimar nada, quería irse simplemente, llevarse su cuerpo a otra parte. No tenía nada de músico, Baryton, conque necesitaba derribar todo como un oso, para acabar de una vez.

Se liberó, él, que se creía razonable, mediante un escándalo de lo más lamentable. Más adelante intentaré contar, con detalle, cómo sucedió.

En lo que a mí respectaba, por el momento, el oficio de ayudante en su casa me parecía perfectamente aceptable.

Las rutinas del tratamiento no eran nada pesadas, si bien de vez en cuando era presa de cierto desasosiego, evidentemente; cuando, por ejemplo, había conversado demasiado tiempo con los internos, me arrastraba entonces como un vértigo, como si me hubieran llevado lejos de mi orilla habitual, los internos, consigo, como quien no quiere la cosa, de una frase corriente a otra, con palabras inocentes, hasta el centro mismo de su delirio. Me preguntaba, por un breve instante, cómo salir de él y si por ventura no estaba encerrado de una vez por todas con su locura, sin sospecharlo.

Me mantenía en el peligroso borde de los locos, en su lindero, por así decir, a fuerza de ser siempre amable con ellos, mi carácter. No zozobraba, pero me sentía todo el tiempo en peligro, como si me hubieran atraído solapadamente a los barrios de su ciudad desconocida. Una ciudad cuyas calles se volvían cada vez más difusas, a medida que avanzabas entre sus borrosas casas, las ventanas desdibujadas y mal cerradas, entre rumores ambiguos. Las puertas, el suelo en movimiento… Te daban ganas, de todos modos, de ir un poco más allá a fin de saber si tendrías fuerza para recuperar la razón, de todos modos, entre los escombros. No tarda en volverse vicio, la razón, como el buen humor y el sueño, en los neurasténicos. Ya no puedes pensar sino en tu razón. Ya todo va mal. Se acabó la diversión.

Todo iba, pues, así, de dudas en dudas, cuando llegamos a la fecha del 4 de mayo. Fecha famosa, aquel 4 de mayo. Me sentía por casualidad tan bien aquel día, que era como un milagro. Setenta y ocho pulsaciones. Como después de un buen almuerzo. ¡Cuando, mira por dónde, todo se puso a dar vueltas! Me agarré. Todo se volvía bilis. Las personas empezaron a poner caras muy extrañas. Me parecían haberse vuelto ásperas como limones y más malintencionadas aún que antes. Por haber trepado demasiado alto, seguramente, demasiado imprudente, a lo alto de la salud, había recaído ante el espejo, a mirarme envejecer, con pasión.

Son incontables los hastíos, las fatigas, cuando llegan esos días mierderos, acumulados entre la nariz y los ojos; hay sitio, en ellos, para años de varios hombres. Más que de sobra para un hombre.

Pensándolo bien, de repente habría preferido volver al instante al Tarapout. Sobre todo porque Parapine

había dejado de hablarme, a mí también. Pero ya no tenía nada que hacer en el Tarapout. Es duro que el único consuelo material y espiritual que te quede sea tu patrón, sobre todo cuando es un alienista y no estás ya demasiado seguro de tu propia cabeza. Hay que resistir. No decir nada. Aún podíamos hablar de mujeres; era un tema inofensivo gracias al cual confiaba aún en poder divertirlo de vez en cuando. En ese sentido, concedía cierto crédito a mi experiencia, modesta y asquerosa competencia.

No era malo que Baryton me considerara en conjunto con algo de desprecio. Un patrón se siente siempre un poco tranquilizado por la ignominia de su personal. El esclavo debe ser, a toda costa, un poco despreciable e incluso mucho. Un conjunto de pequeñas taras crónicas, morales y físicas, justifica la suerte que lo abruma. La tierra gira mejor así, ya que cada cual se encuentra en el lugar que merece.

La persona a la que utilizas debe ser vil, vulgar, condenada a la ruina, eso alivia; sobre todo porque nos pagaba muy mal, Baryton. En esos casos de avaricias agudas, los patronos se muestran siempre un poco recelosos e inquietos. Fracasado, degenerado, golfo, servicial, todo se explicaba, se justificaba y se armonizaba, en una palabra. No le habría desagradado, a Baryton, que me hubiera buscado un poco la policía. Eso es lo que te vuelve servicial.

Por lo demás, yo había renunciado, desde hacía mucho, a cualquier clase de amor propio. Ese sentimiento me había parecido siempre superior a mi condición, mil veces demasiado dispendioso para mis recursos. Me sentía muy bien por haberlo sacrificado de una vez por todas.

Ahora me bastaba con mantenerme en un equilibrio soportable, alimentario y físico. El resto, la verdad, ya no me importaba en absoluto. Pero, de todos modos, me costaba mucho trabajo surcar ciertas noches, sobre todo cuando el recuerdo de lo que había ocurrido en Toulouse venía a despertarme durante horas enteras.

Imaginaba entonces, no podía evitarlo, toda clase de continuaciones dramáticas de la caída de la tía Henrouille en su fosa de las momias y el miedo me subía desde los intestinos, me atenazaba el corazón y me lo mantenía, latiendo, hasta hacerme saltar fuera de la piltra para recorrer mi habitación en un sentido y luego en el otro hasta el fondo de la sombra y hasta la mañana. Durante esos ataques, llegaba a perder la esperanza de recuperar alguna vez bastante despreocupación como para poder quedarme dormido de nuevo. Así, pues, no creáis nunca de entrada en la desgracia de los hombres. Limitaos a preguntarles si aún pueden dormir… En caso de que sí, todo va bien. Con eso basta.

Yo no iba a conseguir nunca más dormir del todo. Había perdido, como de costumbre, esa confianza, la que hay que tener, realmente inmensa, para quedarse dormido del todo entre los hombres. Habría necesitado al menos una enfermedad, una fiebre, una catástrofe concreta, para poder recuperar un poco esa indiferencia, neutralizar mi inquietud y recuperar la tranquilidad idiota y divina. Los únicos días soportables que puedo recordar a lo largo de muchos años fueron los de una gripe con mucha fiebre.

Baryton no me preguntaba nunca por mi salud. Por lo demás, procuraba también no ocuparse de la suya. «¡La ciencia y la vida forman mezclas desastrosas, Ferdinand! Procure siempre no cuidarse, créame… Toda pregunta hecha al cuerpo se convierte en una brecha… Un comienzo de inquietud, una obsesión…» Tales eran sus principios biológicos simplistas y favoritos. En una palabra, se hacía el listo. «¡Con lo conocido tengo bastante!», decía también con frecuencia. Para deslumbrarme.

Nunca me hablaba de dinero, pero era para más pensar en él, en la intimidad.

Yo guardaba en la conciencia, sin comprenderlos aún del todo, los enredos de Robinson con la familia Henrouille y con frecuencia intentaba contarle aspectos y episodios de ellos a Baryton. Pero eso no le interesaba en absoluto. Prefería mis historias de África, sobre todo las relativas a los colegas que había conocido casi por todas partes, a sus prácticas médicas poco comunes, extrañas o equívocas.

De vez en cuando, en el manicomio, teníamos una alarma a causa de su hija, Aimée. De repente, a la hora de la cena no aparecía ni en el jardín ni en su habitación. Por mi parte, yo siempre me esperaba encontrarla un buen día descuartizada detrás de un bosquecillo. Con nuestros locos andando por todos lados, le podía suceder lo peor.

Por lo demás, había escapado por los pelos a la violación, muchas veces ya. Y entonces venían los gritos, las duchas, las aclaraciones interminables. De nada servía prohibirle que pasara por ciertas avenidas demasiado ocultas; volvía a ellas, aquella niña, sin remedio, a los recovecos. Su padre no dejaba de azotarla todas las veces y de modo memorable. De nada servía. Creo que le gustaba todo aquello.

Al cruzarnos con los locos por los pasillos, al adelantarlos, nosotros, el personal, teníamos que ir un poco en guardia. A los alienados les resulta aún más fácil matar que a los hombres normales. Conque se había vuelto como una costumbre colocarnos, para cruzarnos con ellos, con la espalda contra la pared, siempre listos para recibirlos con un patadón en el bajo vientre, al primer gesto. Te espiaban, pasaban. Locura aparte, nos comprendíamos perfectamente.

Baryton deploraba que ninguno de nosotros supiera jugar al ajedrez. Tuve que ponerme a aprender ese juego sólo por complacerlo.

Durante el día, se distinguía, Baryton, por una actividad fastidiosa y minúscula, que volvía la vida muy cansina a su alrededor. Todas las mañanas se le ocurría una idea de índole trivialmente práctica. Substituir el papel en rollos de los retretes por papel en folios desplegables nos obligó a pensar durante toda una semana, que desperdiciamos en resoluciones contradictorias. Por último, se decidió que esperaríamos al mes de los saldos para dar una vuelta por los almacenes. Después de eso, surgió otra preocupación ociosa, la de los chalecos de franela… ¿Había que llevarlos debajo?… ¿O encima de la camisa?… ¿Y la forma de administrar el

sulfato de sodio?… Parapine eludía, mediante un silencio tenaz, esas controversias subintelectuales.

Estimulado por el aburrimiento, yo había acabado contando a Baryton muchas más aventuras que las que había conocido en todos mis viajes, ¡estaba agotado! Y entonces le tocó el turno a él de ocupar enteramente la conversación vacante sólo con sus propuestas y reticencias minúsculas. No había escapatoria. Me había podido por agotamiento. Y yo no disponía, como Parapine, de una indiferencia absoluta para defenderme. Al contrario, tenía que responderle a pesar mío. Ya no podía por menos de discutir por motivos fútiles, hasta el infinito, sobre los méritos comparativos del cacao y el café con leche… Me hechizaba a base de tontería.

Volvíamos a empezar a propósito de cualquier cosa, de las medias para varices, de la corriente farádica óptima, del tratamiento de las celulitis en la región del codo… Yo había llegado a farfullar exactamente de acuerdo con sus indicaciones y sus inclinaciones, a propósito de cualquier cosa, como un técnico de verdad. Me acompañaba, me precedía en ese paseo infinitamente meningítico, Baryton; me saturó la conversación para la eternidad. Parapine se reía con ganas para sus adentros, al oírnos desfilar entre nuestras porfías, que duraban lo que los tallarines, al tiempo que espurreaba el mantel con perdigones del burdeos del patrón.

Pero, ¡paz para el recuerdo del Sr. Baryton, el muy cabrón! Acabé, de todos modos, haciéndolo desaparecer. ¡Me hizo falta mucho genio!

Entre las clientas cuya custodia me habían confiado en especial, las más pejigueras me daban una lata que para qué. Sus duchas por aquí… Sus sondas por allá… Sus vicios, sevicias, y sus grandes agujeros, que había que tener siempre limpios… Una de las jóvenes pacientes era la causa de bastantes de las reprimendas que me echaba el patrón. Destruía el jardín arrancando las flores, era su manía, y a mí no me gustaban las reprimendas del patrón…

«La novia», como la llamábamos, una argentina, de físico no estaba nada mal, pero, en lo moral, sólo tenía una idea, la de casarse con su padre. Conque las flores iban todas, una tras otra, a parar, cosidas, al gran velo blanco que llevaba día y noche, a todas partes. Un caso del que su familia, religiosa fanática, se avergonzaba horriblemente. Ocultaban su hija al mundo y con ella su idea. Según Baryton, sucumbía a las inconsecuencias de una educación demasiado rígida, demasiado severa, de una moral absoluta, que, por así decir, le había estallado en la cabeza.

A la hora del crepúsculo, hacíamos regresar a todos, después de mucho llamarlos, y, además, pasábamos por las habitaciones sobre todo para impedirles, a los excitados, tocarse demasiado frenéticamente antes de dormirse. El sábado por la noche era muy importante moderarlos y prestar mucha atención, porque el domingo, cuando venían los parientes, les causaba muy mala impresión encontrarlos pálidos, a los pacientes, de tanto masturbarse.

Todo aquello me recordaba el caso de Bébert y el jarabe. En Vigny administraba grandes cantidades de aquel jarabe. Había conservado la fórmula. Había acabado creyendo en él.

La portera del manicomio tenía un pequeño comercio de caramelos, con su marido, auténtico cachas, al que recurríamos de vez en cuando, para los casos duros.

Así pasaban las cosas y los meses, bastante agradables, en resumen, y no habría habido demasiados motivos para quejarse, si a Baryton no se le hubiera ocurrido de pronto otra dichosa idea nueva.

Desde hacía mucho, seguramente, se preguntaba si no podría tal vez utilizarme más y mejor aún por el mismo precio. Conque había acabado encontrando el modo.

Un día, tras el almuerzo, sacó su idea. Primero hizo que nos sirvieran una fuente llena de mi postre favorito, fresas con nata. Aquello me pareció de lo más sospechoso. En efecto, apenas había acabado de jalarme su última fresa, cuando me abordó imperioso.

«Ferdinand -me dijo-, me pregunto si le parecería a usted bien dar unas lecciones de inglés a mi hijita Aimée… ¿Qué me dice usted?… Sé que tiene usted un acento excelente… Y en el inglés, verdad, ¡el acento es esencial!… Y, además, sin intención de halagarlo, es usted, Ferdinand, la complacencia en persona.»

«Pues, claro que sí, señor Baryton», le respondí, desprevenido.

Y quedamos, en el acto, en que daría a Aimée, la mañana siguiente, su primera lección de inglés. Y siguieron otras, así sucesivamente, durante semanas…

A partir de aquellas lecciones de inglés fue cuando entramos todos en un período absolutamente turbio, equívoco, durante el cual los acontecimientos se sucedieron a un ritmo que ya no era, ni mucho menos, el de la vida corriente.

Baryton quiso asistir a todas las lecciones que yo daba a su hija. Pese a toda mi solicitud inquieta, a la pobre Aimée no se le daba, a decir verdad, nada bien el inglés. En el fondo, no le importaba, a la pobre Aimée, saber lo que todas aquellas palabras nuevas querían decir. Se preguntaba incluso qué queríamos de ella todos, al insistir, viciosos, así para que retuviera realmente su significado. No lloraba, pero le faltaba muy poco. Habría preferido, Aimée, que la dejaran arreglárselas con el poquito francés que ya sabía, cuyas dificultades y facilidades le bastaban de sobra para ocupar su vida entera.

Pero su padre, por su parte, no lo veía así. «¡Tienes que llegar a ser una joven moderna, Aimée!… -la animaba, incansable, para consolarla-. Yo, tu padre, he sufrido mucho por no haber sabido bastante inglés para desenvolverme como Dios manda entre la clientela extranjera… ¡Anda! ¡No llores, querida!… Escucha al Sr. Bardamu, tan paciente, tan amable y, cuando sepas, a tu vez, pronunciar los *the* con la lengua como él te muestra, te regalaré, te lo prometo, una bonita bicicleta ni-que-la-da…»

Pero no tenía deseos de pronunciar los *the* ni los *enough,* Aimée, pero es que ninguno… Era él, el patrón,

quien los pronunciaba por ella, los *the y* los *rough, y* hacía muchos otros progresos, pese a su acento de Burdeos y su manía por la lógica, gran obstáculo para el inglés. Durante un mes, dos meses así. A medida que se desarrollaba en el padre la pasión por aprender el inglés, Aimée tenía cada vez menos ocasión de forcejear con las vocales. Baryton me acaparaba, ya no me soltaba, me sorbía todo mi inglés. Como nuestras habitaciones eran contiguas, por la mañana podía oírlo, mientras se vestía, transformar ya su vida íntima en inglés. *The coffee is black… My shirt is white… The garden is green… How are yon today Bardamu?,* gritaba a través del tabique. Muy pronto cogió gusto a las formas más elípticas de la lengua.

Con aquella perversión iba a llevarnos muy lejos… En cuanto hubo tomado contacto con la literatura importante, nos fue imposible parar… Tras ocho meses de progresos tan anormales, había llegado casi a reconstituirse enteramente en el plano anglosajón. Así consiguió al tiempo asquearme del todo, dos veces seguidas.

Poco a poco habíamos ido dejando a la pequeña Aimée fuera de las conversaciones y, por tanto, cada vez más tranquila. Volvió, apacible, entre sus nubes, sin pedir explicaciones. No iba a aprender el inglés, ¡y se acabó! ¡Todo para Baryton!

Volvió el invierno. Llegó la Navidad. En las agencias anunciaban billetes de ida y vuelta para Inglaterra a precio reducido… Al pasar por los bulevares con Parapine, cuando lo acompañaba al cine, los había visto yo, esos anuncios… Había entrado incluso en una de las agencias para informarme sobre los precios.

Y después en la mesa, entre otras cosas, dije dos palabras a Baryton sobre el asunto. Al principio no pareció interesarle, mi información. La dejó pasar. Yo estaba convencido incluso de que la había olvidado del todo, cuando una noche fue él mismo quien se puso a hablarme de ello para rogarme que le trajera los prospectos.

Entre sesión y sesión de literatura inglesa, jugábamos muchas veces al billar japonés y al chito en una de las celdas de aislamiento, bien provista de barrotes sólidos, situada justo encima del chiscón de la portera.

Baryton destacaba en los juegos de destreza. Parapine apostaba a menudo el aperitivo con él y lo perdía todas las veces. Pasábamos en aquella salita de juegos improvisada veladas enteras, sobre todo durante el invierno, cuando llovía, para no estropearle los salones al patrón. En ocasiones, si bien raras, colocaban, en aquella misma salita de juego, a un agitado en observación.

Mientras rivalizaban en destreza, Parapine y el patrón, jugando al chito sobre el tapiz o sobre el suelo, yo me divertía, si puedo expresarme así, intentando experimentar las mismas sensaciones que un preso en su celda. Era una sensación que me faltaba. Con voluntad puedes llegar a sentir amistad por los tipos raros que pasan por los barrios de los suburbios. Al final de la jornada sientes piedad ante la barahúnda que forman los tranvías al traer de París, a los empleados, de vuelta a casa en grupitos dóciles. Al primer desvío, después de la tienda de comestibles, se acabó su derrota. Van a derramarse despacio en la noche. Apenas te da tiempo a contarlos. Pero raras veces me dejaba Baryton soñar a gusto. En plena partida de chito seguía, petulante, con sus insólitas interrogaciones.

«How do yo say» "imposible" en *english,* Ferdinand?…»

En una palabra, nunca se cansaba de hacer progresos. Tendía con toda su estupidez hacia la perfección. Ni siquiera quería oír hablar de aproximaciones ni de concesiones. Por fortuna, una crisis me libró de él. Veamos lo esencial.

A medida que avanzábamos en la lectura de la *Historia de Inglaterra,* le vi perder un poco su seguridad y, al final, lo mejor de su optimismo. En el momento en que abordamos a los poetas isabelinos, su espíritu y su persona experimentaron grandes cambios inmateriales. Al principio me costó un poco convencerme, pero no me quedó más remedio, al final, como a todo el mundo, que aceptarlo tal como se había vuelto, Baryton, lamentable, la verdad. Su atención, antes precisa y severa, flotaba ahora, arrastrada hacia digresiones fabulosas, interminables. Y entonces le tocó el turno a él de permanecer horas enteras, en su propia casa, ahí, ante nosotros, soñador, lejano ya… Aunque me había asqueado por mucho tiempo y con ganas, sentía algo de remordimiento al verlo así, disgregarse, a Baryton. Yo me consideraba un poco responsable de ese derrumbamiento… Su desconcierto espiritual no me era del todo ajeno… Hasta tal punto, que le propuse un día interrumpir por un tiempo nuestros ejercicios de literatura con el pretexto de que un intermedio nos proporcionaría tiempo y ocasión para renovar nuestros recursos documentales… No se dejó engañar por astucia tan débil y opuso, en el acto, una negativa, benévola, bien es verdad, pero del todo categórica… Estaba decidido a proseguir conmigo sin cesar el descubrimiento de la Inglaterra espiritual… Tal como lo había emprendido… Yo no podía responder nada… Me incliné. Temía incluso no disponer de bastantes horas de vida para lograrlo del todo… En una palabra, pese a que yo ya presentía lo peor, hubo que continuar con él, mal que bien, aquella peregrinación académica y desolada.

La verdad es que Baryton había dejado de ser el que era. A nuestro alrededor, personas y cosas perdían, peregrinas y paulatinas, su importancia ya e incluso los colores con que las habíamos conocido adquirían una suavidad soñadora de lo más equívoca…

Ya no daba muestras, Baryton, sino de un interés ocasional y cada vez más lánguido por los detalles administrativos de su propia casa, obra suya, sin embargo, por la que había sentido durante más de treinta años auténtica pasión. Dejaba toda la responsabilidad de los servicios administrativos en manos de Parapine. El desconcierto cada vez mayor de sus convicciones, que aún intentaba disimular púdicamente en público, estaba llegando a ser evidente para nosotros, irrefutable, físico.

Gustave Mandamour, el agente de policía que conocíamos en Vigny porque a veces lo utilizábamos en los trabajos pesados de la casa y que era sin lugar a dudas el ser menos perspicaz que he tenido oportunidad de conocer entre tantos otros del mismo orden, me preguntó un día, por aquella época, si no habría tenido tal vez muy malas noticias el patrón… Lo tranquilicé lo mejor que pude, pero sin demasiado convencimiento.

Todos esos chismes ya no interesaban a Baryton. Lo único que quería era que no se lo molestara con ningún pretexto… Al comienzo de nuestros estudios, de acuerdo con su deseo, habíamos recorrido demasiado rápido la gran *Historia de Inglaterra* de Macaulay, obra capital en dieciséis volúmenes. Reanudamos, por orden suya, esa dichosa lectura y ello en condiciones morales de lo más inquietantes. Capítulo tras capítulo.

Baryton me parecía cada vez más pérfidamente contaminado por la meditación. Cuando llegamos al pasaje, implacable como ninguno, en que Monmouth el Pretendiente acaba de desembarcar en las orillas imprecisas de Kent… En el momento en que su aventura empieza a girar en el vacío… En que Monmouth el Pretendiente no sabe ya muy bien lo que pretende… Lo que quiere hacer. Lo que ha ido a hacer… En que empieza a decirse que le gustaría marcharse, pero ya no sabe adonde ni cómo… Cuando la derrota se alza ante él… En la palidez de la mañana… Cuando el mar se lleva sus últimos navíos… Cuando Monmouth se pone a pensar por primera vez… Baryton no lograba tampoco, en sus asuntos, ínfimos, adoptar sus propias decisiones… Leía y releía ese pasaje y lo murmuraba una y otra vez, además… Abrumado, volvía a cerrar el libro y venía a tumbarse cerca de nosotros.

Durante largo rato, repetía, con los ojos entornados, el texto entero, de memoria, y después, con su acento inglés, el mejor de entre todos los de Burdeos que yo le había dado a elegir, nos recitaba otra vez…

En la aventura de Monmouth, cuando todo el lastimoso ridículo de nuestra pueril y trágica naturaleza se desabrocha, por así decir, ante la Eternidad, Baryton era presa del vértigo, a su vez, y, como ya sólo colgaba por un hilo de nuestro destino corriente, se soltó del todo… Desde aquel momento, puedo afirmarlo, dejó de ser de los nuestros… Ya no podía más…

Al final de aquella misma velada, me pidió que fuera a reunirme con él en su gabinete de director… Desde luego, en vista del extremo a que habíamos llegado, yo me esperaba que me comunicara alguna resolución suprema, mi despido inmediato, por ejemplo… Bueno, pues, ¡no! La decisión que había adoptado, ¡me era, al contrario, del todo favorable! Ahora bien, tan raras veces me ocurría que una suerte favorable me sorprendiese, que no pude por menos de derramar algunas lágrimas… Baryton tuvo a bien considerar pena ese testimonio de mi emoción y entonces le tocó a él consolarme…

«¿Va usted a dudar de mi palabra, Ferdinand, si le garantizo que he necesitado mucho más que valor para decidirme a abandonar esta casa…? ¿Yo, de costumbres tan sedentarias, que usted conoce, yo, ya casi un anciano, en una palabra, con toda una carrera que no ha sido sino una larga verificación, muy tenaz, muy escrupulosa, de tantas maldades lentas o rápidas?… ¿Cómo es posible que haya llegado a abjurar de todo en unos meses?… Y, sin embargo, aquí me tiene, en cuerpo y alma, en este estado de desapego, de nobleza… ¡Ferdinand! *Hurrah!* ¡Como usted dice en inglés! Mi pasado ya no es nada para mí, ¡eso está claro! ¡Voy a renacer, Ferdinand! ¡Sencillamente! ¡Me marcho! ¡Oh, sus lágrimas, bondadoso amigo, no podrán atenuar el asco definitivo que siento por todo lo que me retuvo aquí durante tantos y tantos años insípidos!… ¡Es demasiado! ¡Basta, Ferdinand! ¡Le digo que me voy! ¡Huyo! ¡Me evado! ¡Se me parte el corazón, desde luego! ¡Lo sé! ¡Sangro! ¡Lo veo! Pues bien, Ferdinand, por nada del mundo, sin embargo… Ferdinand, por nada… ¡me haría usted volver sobre mis pasos! ¿Me oye usted?… Aun cuando hubiera dejado caer un ojo ahí, en algún punto de este cieno, ¡no volvería a recogerlo! Conque, ¡con eso está dicho todo! ¿Duda usted ahora de mi sinceridad?»

Yo ya no dudaba de nada. Era capaz de todo, Baryton, estaba claro. Por lo demás, creo que habría sido fatal para su razón que yo me hubiese puesto a contradecirlo en el estado a que había llegado. Le dejé descansar un momento y después intenté, de todos modos, ablandarlo un poco, me atreví a hacer un intento supremo para traerlo de nuevo hasta nosotros… Mediante los efectos de una ligera transposición… de una argumentación amablemente oblicua…

«¡Abandone, pues, Ferdinand, por favor, la esperanza de verme renunciar a mi decisión! ¡Ya le digo que es irrevocable! Le agradeceré que no me vuelva a hablar de eso… Por última vez, Ferdinand, ¿quiere usted ser tan amable? A mi edad, las vocaciones, verdad, son muy raras… Es sabido… Pero son irremediables…»

Tales fueron sus propias palabras, casi las últimas que pronunció. Las transmito.

«Tal vez, querido señor Baryton -me atreví, de todos modos, a interrumpirlo de nuevo-, estas vacaciones repentinas que se dispone usted a tomarse no constituyan, en definitiva, sino un episodio un poco novelesco, una oportuna diversión, un entreacto feliz, en el curso un poco austero, bien es verdad, de su carrera… Tal vez tras haber probado otra vida… más amena, menos trivialmente metódica, que la que llevamos aquí, vuelva usted, sencillamente, contento de su viaje, hastiado de imprevistos… Entonces, volverá usted a ocupar, del modo más natural, su lugar a la cabeza de esta institución… Orgulloso de sus experiencias recientes… Renovado, en una palabra, y seguramente del todo indulgente en adelante para las monotonías cotidianas de nuestra ajetreada rutina… ¡Envejecido, por fin! Si me permite usted expresarme así, señor Baryton…»

«¡Qué halagador, este Ferdinand!… Aún encuentra modo de conmoverme en mi orgullo masculino, sensible, exigente incluso, ahora lo descubro pese a tanto hastío y a las adversidades pasadas… ¡No, Ferdinand! Todo el ingenio que usted despliega no podría ablandar, en un momento, todo el fondo abominablemente hostil y doloroso de nuestra voluntad. Por lo demás, Ferdinand, ¡ya no hay tiempo para

vacilar, para volver sobre mis pasos!… ¡Estoy, lo confieso, lo clamo, Ferdinand, vacío! ¡Agobiado, vencido! ¡Por cuarenta años de pequeneces sagaces!… ¡Ya es más que demasiado!… ¿Lo que quiero intentar?

¿Quiere usted saberlo?… Puedo decírselo, a usted, mi amigo supremo, usted que ha tenido a bien compartir, desinteresado, admirable, los sufrimientos de un viejo derrotado… Quiero, Ferdinand, probar a ir a perder mi alma, igual que va uno a perder su perro sarnoso, su perro hediondo, muy lejos, el compañero que le asquea a uno, antes de morir… Por fin solo… Tranquilo… uno mismo…»

«Pero, querido señor Baryton, ¡esta violenta desesperación cuyas inflexibles exigencias me revela usted de pronto nunca la había advertido yo en sus palabras y me deja pasmado! Muy al contrario, sus observaciones cotidianas me parecen aún hoy perfectamente pertinentes… Todas sus iniciativas siempre alegres y fecundas… Sus intervenciones médicas perfectamente juiciosas y metódicas… En vano buscaría en sus actos cotidianos una de esas señales de abatimiento, de derrota… La verdad, no observo nada semejante…»

Pero, por primera vez desde que yo lo conocía, no sentía Baryton ningún placer de recibir mis cumplidos. Me disuadía incluso, amable, para que no continuara la conversación en aquel tono lisonjero.

«No, mi querido Ferdinand, se lo aseguro… Estos testimonios últimos de su amistad vienen a suavizar, desde luego y de forma inesperada, los últimos momentos de mi presencia aquí; sin embargo, toda su solicitud no podría volverme tolerable simplemente el recuerdo de un pasado que me abruma y al que estos lugares apestan… Quiero alejarme a cualquier precio, ¿me oye usted?, y con cualesquiera condiciones…»

«Pero, señor Baryton, ¿qué vamos a hacer en adelante con esta casa? ¿Lo ha pensado usted?»

«Sí, desde luego, lo he pensado, Ferdinand… Usted se hará cargo de la dirección durante el tiempo que dure mi ausencia, ¡y se acabó!… ¿No ha tenido usted siempre relaciones excelentes con nuestra clientela?… Así, pues, su dirección será aceptada fácilmente… Todo irá bien, ya lo verá, Ferdinand… Parapine, por su parte, ya que no puede tolerar la conversación, se ocupará de los mecanismos, los aparatos y el laboratorio… ¡Eso es lo suyo!… Así todo queda arreglado como Dios manda… Por lo demás, he dejado de creer en las presencias indispensables… Por ese lado también, ya lo ve, amigo mío, he cambiado mucho…»

En efecto, estaba desconocido.

«Pero, ¿no teme usted, señor Baryton, que su marcha se comente del modo más malicioso entre nuestra competencia de los alrededores?… ¿De Passy, por ejemplo? ¿De Montretout?… ¿De Gargan-Livry? Todos los que nos rodean… Que nos espían… Esos colegas de una perfidia incansable… ¿Qué sentido atribuirán a su noble y voluntario exilio?… ¿Cómo lo llamarán? ¿Escapada? ¿Qué sé yo qué más? ¿Extravagancia? ¿Derrota? ¿Fracaso? ¿Quién sabe?…»

Esa eventualidad le había hecho sin duda reflexionar larga y penosamente. Aún lo turbaba, ahí, ante mí, empalidecía al pensarlo…

Aimée, su hija, nuestra inocente Aimée, iba a sufrir, con todo aquello, una suerte bastante brutal. La dejaba al cuidado de una de sus tías, una desconocida, a decir verdad, en provincias. Así, liquidadas todas las cosas íntimas, ya sólo nos quedaba, a Parapine y a mí, hacer todo lo posible para administrar todos sus intereses y sus bienes. ¡Bogue, pues, la barca sin capitán!

Después de aquellas confidencias, podía permitirme, me pareció, preguntarle al patrón por qué lado pensaba lanzarse hacia las regiones de su aventura…

«¡Por Inglaterra, Ferdinand!», me respondía, sin vacilar.

Todo lo que nos sucedía, en tan poco tiempo, me parecía, desde luego, muy difícil de asimilar, pero, de todos modos, tuvimos que adaptarnos rápidos a la nueva suerte.

El día siguiente, lo ayudamos, Parapine y yo, a hacerse un equipaje. El pasaporte con todas sus páginas y sus visados le extrañaba un poco. Nunca había tenido pasaporte. Ya que estaba, le habría gustado obtener otros, de recambio. Tuvimos que convencerlo de que era imposible.

Una última vez titubeó respecto a la cuestión de si llevar cuellos duros o blandos y cuántos de cada clase. Con aquel problema, mal resuelto, estuvimos hasta la hora del tren. Saltamos los tres al último tranvía para París. Baryton llevaba sólo una maleta ligera, pues tenía intención de permanecer, por dondequiera que fuese y en todas las circunstancias, móvil y ligero.

En el andén la noble altura de los estribos de los trenes internacionales le impresionó. Vacilaba a la hora de subir aquellos escalones majestuosos. Se recogía ante el vagón como en el umbral de un monumento. Lo ayudamos un poco. Como había cogido billete de segunda, nos hizo al respecto una observación comparativa, práctica y sonriente. «La primera no es mejor», dijo.

Le tendimos las manos. Fue el momento. Sonó el pitido de la salida, con un arranque tremendo, como una catástrofe de chatarra, en el instante bien preciso. Fue una brutalidad abominable para nuestra despedida. «¡Adiós, hijos!», le dio apenas tiempo de decirnos y su mano se separó, hurtada a las nuestras…

Se movía allá, entre el humo, su mano, alargada entre el ruido, ya en la noche, a través de los raíles, cada vez más lejos, blanca…

Por una parte, no lo echamos de menos, pero, de todos modos, su marcha creaba un vacío tremendo en la casa.

Para empezar, su forma de marcharse nos había puesto tristes a nuestro pesar, por decirlo así. No había sido natural, su forma de marcharse. Nos preguntábamos qué podría ocurrimos, a nosotros, tras un golpe semejante.

Pero no tuvimos tiempo de preguntárnoslo demasiado ni tampoco de aburrirnos siquiera. Pocos días

después de que lo acompañáramos hasta la estación, a Baryton, mira por dónde, me anunciaron una visita para mí, en el despacho, para mí en especial. El padre Protiste.

¡Menudo si le di noticias, yo, entonces! ¡Y buenas! Y, sobre todo, ¡del modo como nos había plantado a todos para irse de juerga a los septentriones, Baryton!… No salía de su asombro, Protiste, al enterarse de ello, y después, cuando por fin hubo comprendido, lo único que discernía ya en aquel cambio era el provecho que yo podía sacar de semejante situación. «¡Esta confianza de su director me parece la más halagadora de las promociones, mi querido doctor!», me repetía, machacón.

De nada servía que yo intentara calmarlo; una vez lanzado a la locuacidad, no se apeaba de su fórmula ni cesaba de predecirme el más magnífico de los porvenires, una espléndida carrera médica, como él decía. Yo ya no podía interrumpirlo.

Con mucha dificultad, volvimos, de todos modos, a las cosas serias, a aquella ciudad de Toulouse precisamente, de la que había llegado, él, la víspera. Por supuesto, le dejé contar, a su vez, todo lo qué sabía. Incluso aparenté asombro, estupefacción, cuando me contó el accidente que había tenido la vieja.

«¿Cómo? ¿Cómo? – lo interrumpía yo-. ¿Que ha muerto?… Pero, bueno, ¿cuándo ha sido?»

Conque punto por punto tuvo que soltar la historia entera.

Sin decirme claramente que había sido Robinson quien la había empujado, por la escalera, a la vieja, no me impidió, de todos modos, suponerlo… No había tenido tiempo de decir ni pío, al parecer. Nos comprendimos… Buen trabajo, primoroso… La segunda vez que lo había intentado no había fallado.

Por fortuna, en el barrio, en Toulouse, creían que Robinson estaba del todo ciego aún. Conque lo habían considerado un simple accidente, muy trágico, desde luego, pero, de todos modos, explicable, pensándolo bien, todo, las circunstancias, la edad de la anciana, y también que había sido al final de una jornada, la fatiga… Yo no quería saber más de momento. Ya había recibido más de la cuenta, de confidencias así.

Aun así, me costó trabajo hacerlo cambiar de conversación, al padre. Le obsesionaba, su historia. Volvía a ella una y mil veces, con la esperanza seguramente de hacerme picar, de comprometerme, parecía… ¡Estaba guapo!… Podía esperar sentado… Conque renunció, de todos modos, y se contentó con hablarme de Robinson, de su salud… De sus ojos… Por ese lado, iba mucho mejor… Pero seguía tan desanimado como siempre. ¡Pero que muy bajo de moral, la verdad! Y ello a pesar de la solicitud, del afecto que no cesaban las dos mujeres de prodigarle… Y, sin embargo, no cesaba de quejarse, de su suerte y de su vida.

A mí no me sorprendía oírle decir todo aquello al cura. Me lo conocía, a Robinson, yo. Tristes, ingratas disposiciones tenía. Pero desconfiaba aún más del cura, mucho más aún… Yo no decía esta boca es mía, mientras me hablaba. Conque perdía el tiempo con sus confidencias.

«Su amigo, doctor, pese a su vida material ahora agradable, fácil, *y* a las perspectivas, por otra parte, de un próximo matrimonio feliz, defrauda todas nuestras esperanzas, debo confesárselo… ¡Pues no le ha dado de nuevo por las funestas escapadas, por las golferías, como cuando usted lo conoció en otro tiempo!… ¿Qué le parecen a usted esas disposiciones, mi querido doctor?»

Así, pues, no pensaba allí, en una palabra, sino en dejar todo plantado, Robinson, me parecía entender; la novia y su madre se sentían ofendidas, primero, y, después, sentían toda la pena que era fácil imaginar. Eso era lo que había venido a contarme el padre Protiste. Todo eso era muy inquietante, desde luego, y, por mi parte, yo estaba decidido a callarme, a no intervenir, a ningún precio, en los asuntos de aquella familia… Abortada la conversación, nos separamos, el cura y yo, en el tranvía, con bastante frialdad, en una palabra. Al volver al manicomio, yo no las tenía todas conmigo.

Poco después de aquella visita fue cuando recibimos, de Inglaterra, las primeras noticias de Baryton. Algunas postales. Nos deseaba a todos «salud y suerte». Nos escribió también algunas líneas insignificantes, de aquí y de allá. Por una postal sin texto nos enteramos de que había pasado a Noruega y, unas semanas después, un telegrama vino a tranquilizarnos un poco: «¡Feliz travesía!», desde Copenhague…

Como habíamos previsto, la ausencia del patrón se comentó con la peor intención en el propio Vigny y en los alrededores. Más valía, para el futuro del Instituto, que diéramos en adelante, sobre los motivos de esa ausencia, explicaciones mínimas, tanto ante nuestros enfermos como a los colegas de los alrededores.

Meses pasaron, meses de gran prudencia, apagados, silenciosos. Acabamos evitando del todo el recuerdo mismo de Baryton entre nosotros. Por lo demás, su recuerdo nos daba a todos un poco de vergüenza.

Y después volvió el verano. No podíamos quedarnos todo el tiempo en el jardín vigilando a los enfermos. Para probarnos a nosotros mismos que éramos, a pesar de todo, un poco libres, nos aventurábamos hasta las orillas del Sena, por salir un poco.

Tras el terraplén de la otra orilla, empieza la gran llanura de Gennevilliers, una extensión muy bella, gris y blanca, donde las chimeneas se perfilan suaves entre el polvo y la bruma. Muy cerca del camino de sirga se encuentra la tasca de los barqueros, guarda la entrada del canal. La corriente amarilla va a precipitarse en la esclusa.

Nosotros la mirábamos, a vista de pájaro, durante horas, y, al lado, esa especie de larga ciénaga, cuyo olor vuelve, solapado, hasta la carretera de los coches. Te acostumbras. Ya no tenía color, aquel barro, de tan viejo y fatigado que estaba por las crecidas. Hacia la noche, en verano, se volvía a veces suave, el barro, cuando el cielo, en rosa, se ponía sentimental. Allí, sobre el puente, íbamos a escuchar el acordeón, el de las gabarras, mientras esperaban delante de la puerta que la noche acabara pasando al río. Sobre todo las que bajaban de Bélgica eran musicales, todas pintadas, de verde y amarillo, y con las cuerdas llenas de ropa secándose y

combinaciones de color frambuesa que el viento infla al saltarles dentro a bocanadas.

Yo iba con frecuencia al café de los barqueros, solo, en la hora muerta que sigue al almuerzo, cuando el gato del patrón está muy tranquilo, entre las cuatro paredes, como encerrado en un cielo de esmalte azul para él solito.

Allí también yo, somnoliento al comienzo de una tarde, esperando, bien olvidado, pensaba, a que pasara.

Vi a alguien llegar de lejos, alguien que subía por la carretera. No tardé mucho en comprender. Ya por el puente lo había reconocido. Era mi Robinson en persona. ¡No había la menor duda! «¡Viene por aquí a buscarme!… -me dije al instante-. ¡El cura debe de haberle dado mi dirección!… ¡Tengo que deshacerme de él en seguida!»

En aquel momento me pareció abominable que me molestara justo cuando empezaba a recuperar, egoísta, un poco de tranquilidad. Desconfiamos de lo que llega por las carreteras y con razón. Ya estaba muy cerca de la tasca. Salí. Se sorprendió al verme. «¿De dónde vienes ahora?», le pregunté, así, sin amabilidad. «De la Garenne…», me respondió. «¡Bueno, vale! ¿Has comido? – le pregunté. No parecía que hubiera comido, pero no quería presentarse, nada más llegar, como un muerto de hambre-. ¿Otra vez en danza?», añadí. Porque, puedo asegurarlo ahora, no me alegraba lo más mínimo volver a verlo. Malditas las ganas.

Parapine llegaba también por el lado del canal, a mi encuentro. Muy oportuno. Estaba cansado, Parapine, de quedarse tanto tiempo de guardia en el manicomio. Es cierto que yo me tomaba el servicio un poco a la ligera. En primer lugar, respecto a la situación, habríamos dado cualquier cosa con gusto, uno y otro, por saber con certeza cuándo iba a volver Baryton. Esperábamos que pronto dejaría de darse garbeos por ahí para volver a hacerse cargo de su leonera en persona. Era demasiado para nosotros. No éramos ambiciosos, ni uno ni otro, y nos la traían floja las posibilidades del futuro. En lo que nos equivocábamos, por cierto.

Hay que reconocer una cosa buena de Parapine y es que nunca hacía preguntas sobre la gerencia comercial del manicomio, sobre mi forma de tratar a los clientes; yo lo informaba, de todos modos, a su pesar, por así decir, conque hablaba yo solo. Respecto a Robinson, era importante ponerlo al corriente.

«Ya te he hablado de Robinson, ¿verdad? – le pregunté a modo de introducción-. Ya sabes, mi amigo de la guerra… ¿Recuerdas?»

Me las había oído contar cien veces, las historias de la guerra y las de África también y cien veces de formas diferentes. Era mi estilo.

«Bueno, pues -continué-, aquí lo tenemos, a Robinson, en carne y hueso, procedente de Toulouse… Vamos a comer juntos en casa.» En realidad, al tomar la iniciativa así, en nombre de la casa, yo me sentía un poco violento. Cometía como una indiscreción. Habría necesitado, para el caso, tener una autoridad flexible, atractiva, de la que carecía por completo. Y, además, que Robinson no me facilitaba las cosas. Por el camino del pueblo, se mostraba ya muy curioso e inquieto, sobre todo respecto a Parapine, cuya larga y pálida figura junto a nosotros le intrigaba. Al principio había creído que era un loco también, Parapine. Desde que sabía que vivíamos en Vigny, veía locos por todas partes. Lo tranquilicé.

«Y tú -le pregunté-, ¿has encontrado al menos algún currelo desde que estás de vuelta?»

«Voy a buscar…», se contentó con responderme.

«Pero, ¿tienes los ojos ya curados? ¿Ves bien ahora?»

«Sí, veo casi como antes…»

«Entonces, ¿estarás contento?», le dije.

No, no estaba contento. Tenía otras cosas en que pensar. Me abstuve de hablarle de Madelon en seguida. Era un tema que seguía siendo delicado entre nosotros. Pasamos un buen rato ante el aperitivo y aproveché para ponerlo al corriente de muchas cosas del manicomio y de otros detalles más. Nunca he podido dejar de charlar por los codos. Bastante parecido, a fin de cuentas, a Baryton.

La cena acabó en plena cordialidad. Después, no podía, la verdad, enviarlo así, a la calle, a Robinson Léon. Decidí al instante montarle en el comedor una cama plegable de momento. Parapine seguía sin dar su opinión. «¡Mira, Léon! – le dije-. Puedes vivir aquí mientras buscas un sitio…» «Gracias», respondió simplemente. Y desde aquel momento todas las mañanas se iba en el tranvía a París en busca, según decía, de un empleo de representante.

Estaba harto de la fábrica, decía, quería «representar». Tal vez se esforzara por encontrar una representación, hay que ser justos, pero el caso es que no la encontró.

Una tarde volvió de París más temprano que de costumbre. Yo estaba aún en el jardín, vigilando las inmediaciones del gran estanque. Vino a buscarme para decirme dos palabras.

«¡Escucha!», empezó.

«Escucho», respondí.

«¿No podrías darme tú un empleillo aquí mismo?… No encuentro nada…»

«¿Has buscado bien?»

«Sí, he buscado bien…»

«¿Quieres un empleo en la casa? Pero, ¿para qué? Conque, ¿no encuentras un empleillo cualquiera en París? ¿Quieres que preguntemos Parapine y yo a la gente que conocemos?»

Le molestaba que le propusiera ayudarlo a buscar un empleo.

«No es que no se encuentre absolutamente nada -prosiguió entonces-. Se podría encontrar tal vez… Alguna cosilla… Pero a ver si me comprendes… Necesito absolutamente parecer estar mal de la cabeza… Es urgente e

indispensable que parezca estar mal de la cabeza…»

«¡Vale! – dije yo entonces-. ¡No me digas más!…»

«Sí, sí, Ferdinand, al contrario, tengo que decirte mucho más -insistía-. Quiero que me comprendas bien… Y, además, como te conozco, porque tú eres lento para comprender y para decidirte…»

«Anda, venga -dije resignado-, cuenta…»

«Como no parezca yo un loco, la cosa va ir mal, te lo garantizo… Se va a armar una buena… Ella es capaz de hacer que me detengan… ¿Me comprendes ahora?»

«¿Te refieres a Madelon?»

«¡Sí, claro!»

«¡Pues vaya!»

«Ni que lo digas…»

«¿Os habéis enfadado del todo, entonces?»

«Ya lo ves…»

«¡Ven por aquí, si me quieres dar más detalles! – lo interrumpí entonces y me lo llevé aparte-. Será más prudente, por los locos… Pueden comprender también algunas cosas y contar otras aún más extrañas… con todo lo locos que están…»

Subimos a una de las celdas de aislamiento y, una vez allí, no tardó demasiado en exponerme toda la situación, sobre todo porque yo ya estaba más que al corriente de sus capacidades y, además, que el padre Protiste me había hecho suponer el resto…

En la segunda ocasión, no había fallado. ¡No se podía decir que hubiera sido un maleta! ¡Eso sí que no! Ni mucho menos. Había que reconocerlo.

«Compréndelo, la vieja me perseguía cada vez más… Sobre todo desde que empecé a mejorar un poco de los ojos, es decir, cuando empecé a poder ir solo por la calle… Volví a ver cosas desde aquel momento… Y volví a ver también a la vieja… Es más, ¡sólo la veía a ella!… ¡La tenía todo el tiempo ahí, ante mí!… ¡Era como si me hubiese cerrado la existencia!… Estoy seguro de que lo hacía a propósito… Sólo para fastidiarme… Si no, ¡no se explica!… Y después en la casa, donde estábamos todos, ya la conoces, ¿eh?, la casa, no era difícil pelearse… ¡Ya viste lo pequeña que era!… ¡Como sardinas en lata! ¡Es la pura verdad!»

«Y los escalones del panteón, no eran muy resistentes, ¿eh?»

Yo mismo había notado lo peligrosa que era, la escalera, al visitarla la primera vez con Madelon, que ya se movían, los escalones.

«No, con eso estaba chupado», reconoció, con toda franqueza.

«¿Y la gente de por allí? – volví a preguntarle-. ¿Los vecinos, los curas, los periodistas?… ¿No hicieron comentarios, cuando ocurrió?…»

«No, hay que ver… Además, es que no me creían capaz… Me tomaban por un rajado… Un ciego… ¿Comprendes?…»

«En fin, puedes agradecer tu buena suerte, porque si no… ¿Y Madelon? ¿Qué tenía que ver en todo aquello? ¿Estaba de acuerdo?»

«No del todo… Pero un poco, de todos modos, lógicamente, ya que el panteón, verdad, iba a pasar a nuestra propiedad, cuando la vieja muriera… Estaba previsto así… íbamos a hacernos cargo nosotros del negocio…»

«Entonces, ¿por qué no pudisteis seguir juntos después de eso?»

«Mira, eso es difícil de explicar…»

«¿Ya no te quería?»

«Sí, hombre, al contrario, me quería mucho y, además, estaba muy interesada por el matrimonio… Su madre también lo deseaba y mucho más aún que antes y que se hiciera en seguida, por las momias de la tía Henrouille que nos correspondían, conque teníamos de sobra para vivir, los tres, en adelante, tranquilos…»

«¿Qué ocurrió, entonces, entre vosotros?»

«Pues, mira, ¡yo quería que me dejaran en paz de una puta vez! Sencillamente… La madre y la hija…»

«¡Oye, Léon!… -lo interrumpí de repente al oírle decir eso-. Escúchame… Eso no es serio tampoco de tu parte… Ponte en su lugar, de Madelon y su madre… ¿Es que habría sido plato de gusto para ti? ¡Vamos, hombre! Al llegar allí ibas casi descalzo, no tenías dónde caerte muerto, no parabas de protestar todo el santo día, que si la vieja se quedaba con toda tu pasta y que si patatín y que si patatán… Va y deja el campo libre, mejor dicho, la quitas de en medio tú… Y empiezas a poner mala cara otra vez, a pesar de todo… Ponte en el lugar de esas dos mujeres, ¡ponte en su lugar, hombre!… ¡Es insoportable!… Yo que ellas, ¡menudo si te habría mandado a tomar por saco!… Te lo merecías cien veces, ¡que te mandaran al trullo! ¡Ya lo sabes!»

Así mismo se lo dije a Robinson.

«Puede ser -fue y me respondió, devolviéndome la pelota-, pero tú ya puedes ser médico y tener instrucción y todo, que no comprendes nada de mi forma de ser…»

«¡Anda, calla, Léon! – acabé diciéndole y para terminar-. Calla, desgraciado, ¡y deja en paz tu forma de ser! ¡Te expresas como un enfermo!… Cuánto siento que Baryton se haya ido al quinto infierno; si no, ¡te habría puesto en tratamiento, ése! ¡Es lo mejor que se podría hacer por ti, por cierto! ¡Encerrarte, lo primero! ¿Me oyes? ¡Encerrarte! ¡Vaya si se habría encargado ése, Baryton, de tu forma de ser!»

«Si tú hubieras tenido lo que yo y hubieses pasado por lo que yo he pasado -saltó al oírme-, ¡bien enfermo que habrías estado también! ¡Te lo garantizo! ¡Y puede que peor que yo aún! ¡Con lo cagueta que eres!…» Y entonces empezó a ponerme de vuelta y media, como si hubiera tenido derecho.

Yo lo miraba fijamente, mientras me ponía verde. Estaba acostumbrado a que me maltrataran así, los enfermos. Ya no me molestaba.

Había adelgazado mucho desde lo de Toulouse y, además, algo que yo no conocía aún le había subido a la cara, como un retrato, parecía, sobre sus facciones enormes, con el olvido ya, silencio en derredor.

En las historias de Toulouse había otra cosa más, menos grave, evidentemente, que no había podido tragar, pero, al acordarse, se le revolvía la bilis. Era haberse visto obligado a untar la mano a toda una patulea de traficantes para nada. No había podido tragar lo de haberse visto obligado a dar comisiones a diestro y

siniestro, en el momento de tomar posesión de la cripta, al cura, a la señora de las sillas, a la alcaldía, a los vicarios y a muchos otros más y todo ello sin resultado, en una palabra. Cuando volvía a hablar de eso, es que se ponía enfermo. Robo a mano armada, llamaba esos manejos.

«Entonces, ¿os casasteis, a fin de cuentas?», le pregunté, para acabar.

«Pero, ¡si te he dicho que no! ¡Yo ya no quería!»

«¿No estaba mal, de todos modos, la Madelon? ¿No irás a decirme que no?»

«La cuestión no es ésa…»

«Pues claro que sí que es ésa la cuestión. Si estabais libres, como dices… Si estabais absolutamente decididos a marcharos de Toulouse, podíais perfectamente dejar encargada del panteón a su madre por un tiempo… Podíais volver más adelante…»

«Lo que es el físico -prosiguió- no hace falta que lo jures, era mona de verdad, lo reconozco, no me habías engañado, desde luego, y sobre todo que, tú fíjate, cuando volví a ver por primera vez, como preparado a propósito, fue a ella, por así decir, a quien vi la primera, en un espejo… ¿Te imaginas?… ¡A la luz!… Ya hacía por lo menos dos meses que se había caído la vieja… La vista me volvió como de repente ante ella, al intentar mirarle la cara… Un rayo de luz, en una palabra… ¿Me comprendes?»

«¿No fue agradable?»

«Menudo si fue agradable… Pero eso no era todo…»

«Te diste el piro, de todos modos…»

«Sí, pero te voy a explicar, ya que quieres entender, fue ella la primera que empezó a encontrarme raro… Que si estaba desanimado… Que si estaba antipático… Chorraditas, pijaditas…»

«¿No sería que te remordía la conciencia?»

«¿La conciencia?»

«Tú sabrás…»

«Llámalo como quieras, pero no estaba animado… Y se acabó… De todos modos, yo creo que no eran remordimientos…»

«¿Estabas enfermo, entonces?»

«Eso debe de ser más bien, enfermo… Por cierto, que hace ya una hora por lo menos que intento decírtelo, que estoy enfermo… Reconocerás que tardas la tira…»

«¡Bueno! ¡Vale! – le respondí-. Lo diremos, que estás enfermo, ya que es lo más prudente, según tú…»

«Bien hecho -volvió a insistir-, porque de esa mujer me espero cualquier cosa… Es pero que muy capaz de soltar la liebre antes de nada…»

Era como un consejo que parecía darme y yo no quería sus consejos. No me gustaba nada todo aquello, por las complicaciones que iban a presentarse otra vez.

«¿Crees que soltaría la liebre? – le pregunté otra vez para asegurarme-. Pero, ¡si era tu cómplice en cierto modo!… ¡Eso debería hacerla reflexionar un momento antes de ponerse a largar!»

«¿Reflexionar?… -volvió a saltar él, entonces, al oírme-. Cómo se ve que no la conoces… -Le hacía gracia oírme-. Pero, ¡si no dudaría ni un segundo!… ¡Te lo digo yo! Si la hubieras tratado como yo, ¡no lo dudarías! ¡Te repito que está enamorada!… Entonces, ¿es que no has conocido tú a una mujer enamorada? Cuando está enamorada, ¡es una loca, sencillamente! ¡Una loca! Y de mí es de quien está enamorada, ¡loquita!… ¿Te das cuenta? ¿Comprendes? Conque, ¡todas las locuras la excitan! ¡Es muy sencillo! ¡No la detienen! ¡Al contrario!…»

Yo no podía decirle que me extrañaba un poco, de todos modos, que hubiera llegado en unos meses a ese grado de frenesí, Madelon, porque, de todos modos, yo la había conocido un poquito, a Madelon… Yo tenía mi opinión sobre ella, pero no podía comunicarla.

Por su forma de espabilarse en Toulouse y por las cosas que le había oído decir, estando yo detrás del álamo, el día de la gabarra, era difícil imaginar que hubiera podido cambiar de disposiciones hasta ese punto y en tan poco tiempo… Me había parecido más espabilada que trágica, desenvuelta de lo lindo y muy contenta de pescarlo, a Robinson, con sus cuentos y camelos siempre que podía hacer el paripé. Pero de momento, llegados a ese punto, yo no podía decirle nada. Tenía que dejarlo pasar. «¡Bueno! ¡Vale! ¡De acuerdo! – concluí-. ¿Y la madre, entonces? ¡Debió de armar la marimorena, la madre, cuando comprendiera que te las pirabas y de verdad!…»

«¡Y que lo digas! Y eso que se pasaba todo el santo día diciendo que yo era un cochino, ¡y, tú fíjate, justo cuando más necesitaba, al contrario, que me hablaran amablemente!… ¡Unas monsergas!… En una palabra, aquello no podía continuar tampoco con la madre, conque le propuse a Madelon dejarles el panteón a ellas dos y marcharme yo, por mi parte, a dar una vuelta, volver a ver mundo un poco…

»"Irás conmigo -protestó ella entonces-. Soy tu novia, ¿no?… Irás conmigo, Léon, ¡o no irás!… Y además -insistía- que no estás curado del todo…"

»"¡Sí que estoy curado y me voy a ir solo!", le respondía yo… Y de ahí no salíamos.

»"¡Una mujer acompaña siempre a su marido! – decía la madre-. ¡Lo que tenéis que hacer es casaros!" La apoyaba sólo para fastidiarme.

»Al oír esas cosas, yo sufría. ¡Ya me conoces! ¡Como si hubiera yo necesitado a una mujer para ir a la guerra! ¡Y para escapar de ella! Y en África, ¿es que tenía mujeres yo? Y en América, ¿tenía acaso mujer yo?… De todos modos, de oírlas discutir así durante horas, ¡me daba dolor de vientre! ¡Un tostón! ¡Sé para lo que

sirven las mujeres, de todos modos! Tú también, ¿eh? ¡Para nada! ¡Pues no he viajado yo ni nada! Por fin, una noche que me habían sacado de quicio de verdad con sus rollos, ¡fui y le solté de una vez a la madre todo lo que pensaba de ella! "A usted lo que le pasa es que es una vieja gilipuertas -fui y le dije-. ¡Es usted una tía aún más idiota que la Henrouille!… Si hubiera usted conocido un poco más de mundo, como yo he conocido, se lo pensaría un poco antes de ponerse a dar consejos a toda la gente. ¡A ver si se cree que, porque se haya pasado el tiempo recogiendo trozos de vela en un rincón de su puñetera iglesia, sabe algo de la vida! ¡Salga un poco también usted, que le sentará bien! ¡Ande, vaya a pasearse un poco, vieja imbécil! ¡Así aprenderá! ¡Le quedará menos tiempo para rezar y no andará diciendo tantas gilipolleces!…"

»¡Ya ves tú cómo la traté, yo, a la madre! Te digo que hacía mucho que tenía ganas de echarle una buena bronca y, además, que lo necesitaba, la tía esa, con ganas… Pero a fin de cuentas a mí fue a quien me vino bien… Me liberó en cierto modo de la situación… Ahora, que parecía también que sólo esperaba ese momento, la muy puta, a que yo me desahogara, ¡para lanzarme, a su vez, todos los insultos que sabía! ¡No quieras ver lo que soltó por la boca! "¡Ladrón! ¡Vago! – me soltó-. ¡Que ni siquiera tienes un oficio!… ¡Pronto va a hacer un año que te damos de comer, mi hija y yo…! ¡Inútil!… ¡Chulo de putas!…"

¡Tú fíjate! Lo que se dice una escena familiar… Se quedó un poco como reflexionando y después lo dijo un poco más bajo, pero mira, chico, lo dijo y, además, con toda el alma: "¡Asesino!… ¡Asesino!", me llamó. Eso me enfrió un poco.

»La hija, al oír eso, tenía como miedo de que me la cargara allí mismo, a su madre. Se arrojó entre nosotros. Le cerró la boca a su madre con su propia mano. Hizo bien. Conque, ¡estaban de acuerdo, las muy putas!, me decía yo. Era evidente. En fin, no insistí… Ya no era momento de violencias… Y, además, que, en el fondo, me la chupaba que estuvieran de acuerdo… ¿Crees tú que, después de haberse desahogado, me iban a dejar tranquilo en adelante?… ¡Sí, sí! ¡Ni mucho menos! Eso sería no conocerlas… La hija volvió a empezar. Tenía fuego en el corazón y en el chocho también… Volvió a darle con más fuerza…

»"Te quiero, Léon, ya lo ves que te quiero, Léon…"

»Sólo sabía decir eso: "te quiero". Como si fuera la respuesta para todo.

«"¿Todavía le quieres? – volvía la madre a la carga, al oírla-. Pero, ¿es que no ves que es un simple golfo? ¿Un inútil? Ahora que ha recuperado la vista, gracias a nuestros cuidados, ¡vas a ver tú lo desgraciada que te va a hacer! ¡Te lo digo yo, tu madre!…"

«Lloramos todos, para acabar la escena, incluso yo, porque no quería ponerme del todo a mal con aquellos dos bichos, enfadarme más de la cuenta, pese a todo.

«Conque me fui, pero nos habíamos dicho demasiadas cosas como para que aquello pudiera durar mucho tiempo. Aun así, la situación se prolongó durante semanas, venga reñir por esto y por lo otro, y, además, vigilándonos durante días y, sobre todo, por las noches.

»No podíamos decidirnos a separarnos, pero ya no sentíamos igual. Lo que nos mantenía juntos aún eran los miedos.

«"Entonces, ¿es que quieres a otra?", me preguntaba Madelon, de vez en cuando.

»"Pero, ¿qué dices? – intentaba tranquilizarla yo-. Pues claro que no." Pero estaba claro que no me creía. Para ella había que querer a alguien en la vida y no había vuelta de hoja.

»"A ver -le respondía yo-, ¿qué podría yo hacer con otra mujer?" Pero era su manía, el amor. Yo ya no sabía qué contarle para calmarla. Se le ocurrían unas cosas que yo no había oído en mi vida. Nunca habría imaginado que ocultara cosas así en la cabeza.

»"¡Me has robado el corazón, Léon! – me acusaba y, además, en serio-. ¡Te quieres marchar! – me amenazaba-. ¡Márchate! Pero, ¡te aviso que me moriré de pena, Léon!…" ¿Que yo iba a ser la causa de su muerte de pena? ¿Con qué se come eso? ¿Eh? ¡Dime tú! "Pero, ¡que no! ¡Qué cosas dices! – la tranquilizaba yo-. En primer lugar, ¡yo no te he robado nada! Pero, bueno, ¡si ni siquiera te he hecho un hijo! ¡Reflexiona! Tampoco te he pegado enfermedades, ¿no? ¿Entonces? Lo único que quiero es irme, ¡nada más! Irme de vacaciones, como quien dice. Con lo sencillo que es… Intenta ser razonable…" Y cuanto más intentaba hacerle comprender mi punto de vista, menos le gustaba a ella. En una palabra, que ya no nos entendíamos. Se ponía como rabiosa con la idea de que yo pudiese pensar de verdad lo que decía, que era la pura verdad, simple y sincera.

»Además, creía que eras tú quien me incitaba a largarme… Al ver entonces que no me iba a retener avergonzándome con mis sentimientos, intentó retenerme de otro modo.

»"¡No vayas a creer, Léon -me dijo entonces- que quiero seguir contigo por el negocio del panteón!… Ya sabes que a mí el dinero me da completamente igual, en el fondo… Lo que yo quisiera, Léon, es quedarme contigo… Ser feliz… Eso es todo… Es muy natural… No quiero que me dejes… Es muy duro separarse cuando se ha querido como nos queríamos nosotros dos… Júrame, al menos, Léon, que no te irás por mucho tiempo…"

»Y así siguió su crisis durante semanas. No había duda de que estaba enamorada y pesadísima… Cada noche otra vez a vueltas con su locura de amor. Al final, aceptó dejar a su madre encargada del panteón, a condición de que nos marcháramos los dos juntos a buscar trabajo a París… ¡Siempre juntos!… ¡Cuidado con la tía! Estaba dispuesta a entender cualquier cosa, salvo que yo me fuera solo por mi lado y ella por el suyo… Eso ni hablar… Conque cuanto más se empeñaba, más enfermo me ponía, ¡por fuerza!

»No valía la pena intentar hacerla entrar en razón. Me di cuenta de que era tiempo perdido, la verdad, o

una idea fija y que la volvía más rabiosa aún. Conque no me quedó más remedio que ponerme a probar trucos para deshacerme de su amor, como ella decía… Entonces fue cuando se me ocurrió la idea de meterle miedo contándole que de vez en cuando me volvía un poco loco… Que me daban ataques… Sin avisar… Me miró con mala cara, con expresión muy extraña… Aún no estaba del todo segura de si se trataba de un embuste… Sólo, que, de todos modos, a causa de las aventuras que le había yo contado antes y, además, de la guerra, que me había afectado, y, sobre todo, del último chanchullo, lo de la tía Henrouille, y también lo de que me hubiera vuelto de repente tan raro con ella, le dio que pensar, de todos modos…

»Durante más de una semana estuvo pensando y me dejó muy tranquilo… Debía de haber hecho alguna confidencia a su madre sobre mis ataques… El caso es que insistían menos en retenerme… "Ya está -me decía yo-. ¡Esto va a dar resultado! Ya me veo libre…" Ya me veía largándome muy tranquilo, a hurtadillas, hacia París, ¡sin decir ni pío!… Pero, ¡espera! Resulta que quise hacerlo todo demasiado bien… Me esmeré… Creía haber encontrado el truco perfecto para probarles de una vez por todas que era la verdad… Que estaba pero como una cabra a ratos… "¡Toca! – le dije una noche a Madelon-. Tócame ahí detrás, en la cabeza, ¡el bulto! ¿Notas la cicatriz? ¿Has visto el bulto tan grande que tengo? ¿Eh?…"

«Después de palparme bien el bulto, en la cabeza, se sintió conmovida, que no te puedes imaginar… Pero, ¡vaya, hombre!, eso la excitó aún más, ¡no le repugnó ni mucho menos!… "Ahí es donde me hirieron en Flandes. Ahí es donde me hicieron la trepanación…", insistía yo.

»"¡Ah, Léon! – saltó entonces, al sentir el bulto- ¡te pido perdón, Léon mío!… Hasta ahora he dudado de ti, pero, ¡te pido perdón con toda el alma! ¡Me doy cuenta! ¡He sido infame contigo! ¡Sí! ¡Sí! Léon, ¡he sido horrible!… ¡No volveré a ser mala contigo nunca! ¡Te lo juro! ¡Quiero expiar, Léon! ¡En seguida! No me impidas expiar, ¿eh?… ¡Te voy a devolver la felicidad! ¡Te voy a cuidar bien, de verdad! ¡A partir de hoy! ¡Voy a ser muy paciente para siempre contigo! ¡Voy a ser muy dulce! ¡Ya verás, Léon! ¡Te voy a comprender tan bien, que no vas a poder vivir sin mí! ¡Mi corazón es tuyo otra vez! ¡te pertenezco!… ¡Todo! ¡Toda mi vida, Léon, te doy! Pero dime que me perdonas al menos, ¿eh, Léon?…"

»Yo no había dicho nada así, nada. Ella lo había dicho todo, conque le resultaba muy fácil contestarse a sí misma… ¿Cómo había que hacer entonces para disuadirla?

«¡Haber palpado mi cicatriz y mi bulto la había emborrachado, por así decir, de amor, de golpe! Quería volver a cogerla en las manos, mi cabeza, y no soltarla y hacerme feliz hasta la Eternidad, ¡quisiera yo o no! A partir de aquella escena, su madre no volvió a tener derecho a la palabra para echarme broncas. No le dejaba hablar, Madelon, a su madre. No la habrías reconocido, ¡quería protegerme a más no poder!

«¡Aquello tenía que acabar! Desde luego, yo habría preferido, claro está, que nos hubiéramos separado como buenos amigos… Pero es que ya ni valía la pena intentarlo… No podía más de amor y estaba muy terca. Una mañana, mientras estaban en la compra, la madre y ella, hice como tú, un paquetito, y me di el piro a la chita callando… Después de eso, ¿no dirás que no he tenido bastante paciencia?… Es que, te lo repito, no había nada que hacer… Ahora, ya lo sabes todo… Cuando te digo que es capaz de todo, esa chica, y que puede perfectamente venir a insistirme de nuevo aquí, de un momento a otro, ¡no me vengas con que veo visiones! ¡Sé lo que me digo! ¡Me la conozco yo! Y estaríamos más tranquilos, en mi opinión, si me encontrara ya como encerrado con los locos… Así, me sería más fácil hacer como quien ya no comprende nada… Con ella, eso es lo que hay que hacer… No comprender…»

Dos o tres meses antes, todo lo que acababa de contarme, Robinson, me habría interesado aún, pero yo había como envejecido de golpe.

En el fondo, me había vuelto cada vez más como Baryton, me la traía floja. Todo eso que me contaba Robinson de su aventura en Toulouse no era ya para mí un peligro vivo; de nada me servía intentar interesarme por su caso, olía a rancio, su caso. De nada sirve decir ni pretender, el mundo nos abandona mucho antes de que nos vayamos para siempre.

Las cosas que más te interesan, un buen día decides comentarlas cada vez menos, y con esfuerzo, cuando no queda más remedio. Estás pero que muy harto de oírte hablar siempre… Abrevias… Renuncias… Llevas más de treinta años hablando… Ya no te importa tener razón. Te abandona hasta el deseo de conservar siquiera el huequecito que te habías reservado entre los placeres… Sientes hastío… En adelante te basta con jalar un poco, tener un poco de calorcito y dormir lo más posible por el camino de la nada. Para recuperar el interés, habría que descubrir nuevas muecas que hacer delante de los demás… Pero ya no tienes fuerzas para cambiar de repertorio. Farfullas. Buscas aún trucos y excusas para quedarte ahí, con los amiguetes, pero la muerte está ahí también, hedionda, a tu lado, todo el tiempo ahora y menos misteriosa que una partida de brisca. Sólo conservas, preciosas, las pequeñas penas, la de no haber encontrado tiempo para ir a Bois-Colombes a ver, mientras aún vivía, a tu anciano tío, cuya cancioncilla se extinguió para siempre una noche de febrero. Eso es todo lo que has conservado de la vida. Esa pequeña pena tan atroz, el resto lo has vomitado más o menos a lo largo del camino, con muchos esfuerzos y pena. Ya no eres sino un viejo reverbero de recuerdos en la esquina de una calle por la que ya no pasa casi nadie.

Puestos a aburrirse, lo menos cansino es hacerlo con hábitos regulares. Me empeñaba en que todo el mundo estuviera acostado en la casa a las diez de la noche. Yo me encargaba de apagar las luces. Los negocios iban solos.

Por lo demás, no hicimos derroche alguno de imaginación. El sistema Baryton de los «cretinos en el cine» nos ocupaba suficientemente. Tampoco se hacían demasiadas economías en la casa. El despilfarro, nos

decíamos, lo haría tal vez volver, al patrón, ya que lo angustiaba tanto.

Habíamos comprado un acordeón para que Robinson pudiese poner a bailar a nuestros enfermos en el jardín durante el verano. Era difícil tenerlos ocupados en Vigny, a los enfermos, día y noche. No podíamos enviarlos todo el tiempo a la iglesia, se aburrían demasiado en ella.

De Toulouse no volvimos a tener la menor noticia, el padre Protiste no volvió tampoco a vernos nunca. La existencia en el manicomio se organizaba monótona, furtiva. Moralmente, no estábamos a gusto. Demasiados fantasmas, aquí y allá.

Pasaron algunos meses más. Robinson se recuperaba. Por Semana Santa nuestros locos se agitaron un poco, mujeres ligeras de ropa pasaban y volvían a pasar por delante de nuestros jardines. Primavera precoz. Bromuros.

En el Tarapout, desde la época en que fui extra, habían renovado el personal muchas veces. Las inglesitas habían acabado muy lejos, según me dijeron, en Australia. No las volveríamos a ver…

Las tablas, desde mi historia con Tania, me estaban prohibidas. No insistí.

Nos pusimos a escribir cartas casi a todas partes y sobre todo a los consulados de los países del Norte, para obtener algunos indicios sobre las posibles andanzas de Baryton. No recibimos respuesta interesante alguna de ellos.

Parapine realizaba, calmado y silencioso, su servicio técnico a mi lado. Desde hacía veinticuatro meses no había pronunciado más de veinte frases en total. Me veía obligado a adoptar prácticamente solo las iniciativas materiales y administrativas que la situación cotidiana requería. A veces metía la pata, pero Parapine no me lo reprochaba nunca. Nos entendíamos a fuerza de indiferencia. Por lo demás, un trasiego suficiente de enfermos aseguraba el aspecto material de nuestra institución. Pagados los proveedores y el alquiler, nos quedaba aún mucho con que vivir, aun pagando la pensión de Aimée a su tía religiosamente, por supuesto.

Robinson me parecía mucho menos inquieto ahora que a su llegada. Había recuperado el buen color y tres kilos. En una palabra, mientras hubiera locos en las familias, no dejarían de recurrir a nosotros, estando como estábamos tan a mano, cerca de la capital. Ya sólo nuestro jardín justificaba el viaje. Venían a propósito de París para admirar nuestros macizos y nuestros bosquecillos de rosas en pleno verano.

Uno de esos domingos de junio fue cuando me pareció reconocer a Madelon, por primera vez, en medio de un grupo de transeúntes, inmóvil por un instante, justo delante de nuestra verja.

Al principio, no quise comunicar esa aparición a Robinson, para no asustarlo, y después, tras haberlo pensado despacio, unos días después, le recomendé, de todos modos, no alejarse, al menos por un tiempo, con sus erráticos paseos por los alrededores, a los que se había aficionado. Ese consejo le inquietó. Sin embargo, no insistió para saber más detalles.

Hacia finales de julio, recibimos de Baryton algunas tarjetas postales, desde Finlandia esa vez. Nos dio alegría, pero no nos decía nada de su regreso, Baryton, nos deseaba una vez más «buena suerte» y mil detalles amistosos.

Pasaron dos meses y después otros más… El polvo del verano no volvió a caer sobre la carretera. Uno de nuestros alienados, hacia Todos los Santos, armó un pequeño escándalo delante de nuestro Instituto. Ese enfermo, antes de lo más apacible y correcto, soportó mal la exaltación mortuoria de Todos los Santos. No pudimos impedirle a tiempo gritar por su ventana que no quería morirse nunca… A los transeúntes les parecía de lo más divertido… En el momento en que se produjo aquella algarada tuve de nuevo, pero aquella vez con mayor precisión que la primera, la impresión, muy desagradable, de reconocer a Madelon en la primera fila de un grupo, justo en el mismo sitio, delante de la verja.

Durante la noche que siguió, me desperté angustiado, intenté olvidar lo que había visto, pero todos mis esfuerzos para olvidar fueron en vano. Más valía no volver a intentar dormir.

Hacía mucho que no había yo vuelto a Rancy. Para ser presa de la pesadilla, me preguntaba si no valía más dar una vuelta por allí, de donde todas las desgracias precedían, tarde o temprano… Yo había dejado allá, tras mí, pesadillas… Intentar adelantárseles podía, si acaso, pasar por una especie de precaución… Para Rancy, el camino más corto, viniendo de Vigny, es seguir por la orilla del río hasta el puente de Gennevilliers, ese que es muy plano, tendido sobre el Sena. Las lentas brumas del río se deshacen al ras del agua, se apretujan, pasan, se elevan, se tambalean y van a caer del otro lado del pretil, en torno a las ácidas farolas. La gran fábrica de tractores que queda a la izquierda se esconde en un gran retazo de noche. Tiene las ventanas abiertas por un incendio tétrico que la quema por dentro y nunca acaba. Pasada la fábrica, estás solo en la ribera… Pero no tiene pérdida… Por la fatiga te das cuenta más o menos de que has llegado.

Basta entonces con girar de nuevo a la izquierda por la Rué de Bournaires y ya no queda demasiado lejos. No es difícil orientarse, gracias a la farola roja y verde del paso a nivel, que siempre está encendida.

Incluso de noche, habría ido yo, con los ojos cerrados, hasta el hotelito de los Henrouille. Había ido con frecuencia, en otro tiempo…

Sin embargo, aquella noche, cuando hube llegado delante de la puerta, me puse a pensar en vez de avanzar…

Estaba sola ahora, la nuera, para habitar el hotelito, pensaba yo… Estaban todos muertos, todos… Debía de haber sabido, o al menos sospechado, el modo como había acabado su vieja en Toulouse… ¿Qué efecto le habría causado?

El reverbero de la acera blanqueaba la pequeña marquesina de cristales como con nieve encima de la

escalera. Me quedé ahí, en la esquina de la calle, mirando simplemente, mucho rato. Podría perfectamente haber ido a llamar. Seguro que me habría abierto. Al fin y al cabo, no estábamos enfadados, ella y yo. Hacía un frío glacial, donde me había quedado parado…

La calle acababa aún en un hoyo, como en mis tiempos. Habían prometido arreglarlo, pero no lo habían hecho… Ya no pasaba nadie.

No es que tuviese miedo de ella, de Henrouille nuera. No. Pero, de repente, estando allí, se me quitaron las ganas de volver a verla. Me había equivocado con lo de querer volver a verla. Allí, delante de su casa, descubría yo de repente que ya no tenía nada que enseñarme… Habría sido enojoso incluso que me hablara ahora y se acabó. Eso era lo que habíamos llegado a ser uno para el otro.

Yo había llegado más lejos que ella en la noche ahora, más lejos incluso que la vieja Henrouille, que estaba muerta… Ya no estábamos todos juntos… Nos habíamos separado para siempre… No sólo por la muerte, sino también por la vida… Por la fuerza de las cosas… ¡Cada cual a lo suyo!, me decía yo… Y me marché por donde había venido, hacia Vigny.

No tenía suficiente instrucción para seguirme ahora, la Henrouille nuera… Carácter sí, de eso sí que tenía… Pero, ¡instrucción, no! Ése era *elhic.* ¡Instrucción, no! ¡Es fundamental, la instrucción! Conque ya no podía comprenderme ni comprender lo que ocurría a nuestro alrededor, por puta y terca que fuera… Eso no basta… Hace falta corazón también y saber para llegar más lejos que los demás… Por la Rué des Sanzillons me metí para volverme hacia el Sena y después por el Impasse Vassou. ¡Liquidada, mi inquietud! ¡Contento casi! Orgulloso casi, porque me daba cuenta de que no valía la pena ya insistir por el lado de Henrouille nuera, ¡había acabado perdiéndola, a aquella puta, por el camino!… ¡Qué tía! Habíamos simpatizado a nuestro modo… Nos habíamos comprendido bien en tiempos, la nuera Henrouille y yo… Durante mucho tiempo… Pero ahora ya no estaba bastante abajo para mí, no podía descender… Llegar hasta mí… No tenía instrucción ni fuerza. No se sube en la vida, se baja. Ella ya no podía. Ya no podía bajar hasta donde yo estaba… Había demasiada noche para ella a mi alrededor.

Al pasar por delante del inmueble donde la tía de Bébert era portera, habría entrado también yo, sólo para ver a los que lo ocupaban ahora, su chiscón, donde yo había tratado a Bébert y de donde éste se nos había ido. Tal vez siguiera aún allí, su retrato de colegial, por encima de la cama… Pero era demasiado tarde para despertar a la gente. Pasé de largo, sin darme a conocer…

Un poco más adelante, en el Faubourg de la Liberté, me encontré con la tienda de Bézin, el chamarilero, aún iluminada… No me lo esperaba… Pero sólo con una pequeña lámpara de gas en el medio del escaparate. Ése, Bézin, conocía todos los chismes y las noticias del barrio, a fuerza de parar en las tascas y por ser tan conocido desde la Foire aux Puces hasta la Porte Maillot.

Habría podido contarme muchas cosas, si hubiera estado despierto. Empujé la puerta. Sonó el timbre, pero nadie me respondió. Yo sabía que dormía en la trastienda, en el comedor, en realidad… Ahí estaba, también él, en la obscuridad, con la cabeza sobre la mesa, entre los brazos, sentado de costado junto a la cena fría que lo esperaba, lentejas. Había empezado a comer. El sueño lo había vencido en seguida, al volver. Roncaba fuerte. Había bebido también, claro. Recuerdo bien el día, un jueves, día de mercado en Lilas… Tenía un hatillo lleno de «ocasiones» y aún abierto en el suelo, a sus pies.

Siempre me había parecido buen tío, Bézin, no más innoble que otro. Nada que achacarle. Muy complaciente, fácil de tratar. No iba a despertarlo por curiosidad, para hacerle preguntas… Conque me marché, después de apagar el gas.

Le costaba mucho defenderse, claro está, con su comercio. Pero a él al menos no le costaba trabajo dormirse.

Volví triste, de todos modos, hacia Vigny, pensando en que toda aquella gente, aquellas casas, aquellas cosas sucias y sombrías ya no me llegaban derechas al corazón como en otro tiempo y que a mí, por listillo que pareciera, acaso no me quedase ya bastante fuerza, bien que lo notaba, para seguir adelante, yo, así, solo.

Para las comidas, en Vigny, habíamos conservado las costumbres de la época de Baryton, es decir, que nos reuníamos todos a la mesa, pero ahora, por lo general, en la sala de billar de encima de la portería. Era más familiar que el comedor de verdad, donde perduraban los recuerdos, nada gratos, de las conversaciones en inglés. Y, además, que había demasiados muebles elegantes también, para nosotros, en el comedor, de auténtico estilo «1900» con vidrieras de opalina.

Desde el billar se podía ver todo lo que ocurría en la calle. Podía ser útil. Pasábamos en aquel cuarto domingos enteros. De invitados, recibíamos a veces a cenar a médicos de los alrededores, aquí y allá, pero nuestro convidado habitual era más bien Gustave, agente de tráfico. Ése, desde luego, era asiduo. Nos habíamos conocido así, por la ventana, contemplándolo los domingos realizar su servicio, en el cruce de la carretera, a la entrada del pueblo. Le daban mucho trabajo los automóviles. Primero habíamos cambiado algunas palabras y después, domingo tras domingo, nos habíamos hecho amigos del todo. Yo había tenido ocasión de tratar, en la ciudad, a sus dos hijos, uno tras otro, de sarampión y paperas. Nos era fiel, Gustave Mandamour, que así se llamaba, oriundo de Cantal. Para la conversación era un poco pesado, porque las palabras le salían con dificultad. No dejaba de encontrarlas, las palabras, pero no le salían, se le quedaban en la boca, haciendo ruidos.

Una tarde, Robinson lo invitó al billar, en broma, creo. Pero lo suyo era la constancia, conque desde entonces había vuelto siempre, Gustave, a la misma hora todas las tardes, a las ocho. Se encontraba a gusto

con nosotros, Gustave, mejor que en el café, según nos decía él mismo, por las discusiones políticas, que a menudo se enconaban, entre los asiduos. Nosotros nunca discutíamos de política. En el caso de Gustave, era terreno bastante delicado la política. En el café había tenido problemas con eso. En principio, no debería haber hablado de política, sobre todo cuando había bebido un poco, lo que no era raro. Era conocido incluso porque le daba a la priva, era su debilidad. Mientras que con nosotros se sentía seguro en todos los sentidos. Lo reconocía él mismo. Nosotros no bebíamos. Podía sacar los pies del plato, no había problema. Había confianza.

Cuando pensábamos, Parapine y yo, en la situación de la que nos habíamos librado y la que nos había correspondido en casa de Baryton, no nos quejábamos, no teníamos motivos, porque, a fin de cuentas, habíamos tenido una suerte milagrosa y disponíamos de todo lo necesario y no nos faltaba nada tanto desde el punto de vista de la consideración como de las comodidades materiales.

Sólo, que yo siempre había pensado que no duraría el milagro. Tenía un pasado con muy mala pata, que me repetía, como eructos del Destino. Ya al principio de estar en Vigny, había recibido tres cartas anónimas que me habían parecido de lo más equívocas y amenazadoras. Y después, muchas otras cartas más, todas igual de rencorosas. Cierto es que recibíamos a menudo, cartas anónimas, en Vigny y, por lo general, no les hacíamos demasiado caso. La mayoría procedían de antiguos enfermos, a quienes sus persecuciones iban a atormentarlos a domicilio.

Pero aquellas cartas, por el tono, me inquietaban más, no se parecían a las otras; sus acusaciones eran precisas y, además, sólo se referían a Robinson y a mí. En una palabra, nos acusaban de estar liados. Era una canallada de suposición. Al principio, me resultaba violento contárselo, pero después me decidí, de todos modos, porque no cesaban de llegarme nuevas cartas del mismo estilo. Entonces pensamos juntos a ver de quién podían ser. Enumeramos todas las personas posibles de entre nuestros conocidos comunes. No se nos ocurría ninguna. Para empezar, era una acusación sin pies ni cabeza. Por mi parte, la inversión no era mi estilo y a Robinson, por la suya, ya es que se la chupaban con ganas las cosas del sexo, tanto por delante como por detrás. Si algo le preocupaba, no era, desde luego, la jodienda. Tenía que ser por lo menos una celosa para imaginar semejantes cochinadas.

En resumen, sólo conocíamos a Madelon capaz de venir a acosarnos con invenciones tan asquerosas hasta Vigny. Me daba igual que siguiera escribiendo sus chorradas, pero yo tenía motivos para temer que, exasperada por no recibir respuesta, viniese a acosarnos, en persona, un día u otro, y a armar escándalo en el establecimiento. Había que esperarse lo peor.

Pasamos así unas semanas durante las cuales nos sobresaltábamos cada vez que sonaba el timbre. Yo me esperaba una visita de Madelon o, peor aún, de la autoridad.

Cada vez que el agente Mandamour llegaba para la partida un poco antes que de costumbre, yo me preguntaba si no traería una citación al cinto, pero en aquella época era aún, Mandamour, de lo más amable y relajado. Hasta más adelante no empezó a cambiar de modo notable también él. En aquel tiempo, aún perdía casi todos los días a todos los juegos y tan campante. Si cambió de carácter, fue, por cierto, culpa nuestra.

Una noche, por curiosidad, le pregunté por qué no conseguía nunca ganar a las cartas; en el fondo, no tenía yo motivo para preguntarle eso a Mandamour, sólo por la manía de saber el porqué de todo. ¡Sobre todo porque no jugábamos por dinero! Y, al tiempo que hablábamos de su mala suerte, me acerqué a él y, examinándolo bien, me di cuenta de que tenía una acusada hipermetropía. La verdad es que, con la iluminación que teníamos, apenas si distinguía el trébol del rombo en las cartas. No podía seguir así.

Puse remedio a su enfermedad regalándole unas hermosas gafas. Al principio estaba muy contento de probarse las gafas, pero eso duró poco. Como jugaba mejor, gracias a las gafas, perdía menos que antes y se empeñó en no volver a perder nunca. No era posible, conque hacía trampas. Y cuando con trampas y todo perdía, pasaba horas enteras enfurruñado. En una palabra, se volvió insoportable.

Me preocupaba mucho, se enfadaba por un quítame allá esas pajas, Gustave, y, además, procuraba, a su vez, molestarnos, crearnos inquietudes, preocupaciones. Se vengaba, cuando perdía, a su modo… Y, sin embargo, no era por dinero, repito, por lo que jugábamos, sólo por la distracción y la gloria… Pero se ponía furioso, de todos modos.

Así, una noche que no había tenido suerte, nos habló airado al marcharse. «Señores, ¡permítanme una advertencia!… Con la gente que frecuentan, ¡yo que ustedes me andaría con ojo!… ¡Hay una morena, entre otras personas, que hace días que se pasea por delante de esta casa!… ¡Demasiado a menudo en mi opinión!… ¡Motivos tiene!… ¡No me sorprendería nada que tuviera cuentas que ajustar con uno de ustedes!…»

Así mismo nos lo espetó, el asunto, pernicioso, Mandamour, antes de marcharse. ¡Menuda sensación causó!…

Aun así, yo recobré el dominio de mí mismo al instante. «Muy bien. ¡Gracias, Gustave!… -fui y le respondí con calma-. No sé quién podrá ser la morenita de que habla usted… Ninguna de nuestras antiguas enfermas, que yo sepa, ha tenido motivo para quejarse de nuestro trato… Debe de tratarse una vez más de una pobre enajenada… Ya la encontraremos… En fin, tiene usted razón, más vale siempre estar enterado… Muchas gracias otra vez, Gustave, por habernos avisado… ¡Y buenas noches!»

Robinson, del susto, no podía ya levantarse de la silla. Cuando hubo salido el agente, examinamos la información que acababa de darnos, en todos los sentidos. Podía perfectamente ser, de todos modos, otra mujer y no Madelon… Venían muchas así, a merodear bajo las ventanas del manicomio… Pero, de todos

modos, había motivos poderosos para sospechar que fuera ella y esa duda bastaba para que sintiésemos un canguelo que para qué. Si era ella, ¿cuáles serían sus nuevas intenciones? Y, además, ¿de qué viviría desde hacía tantos meses en París? Si iba a volver a presentarse en persona, teníamos que prepararnos, en seguida.

«Oye, Robinson -dije para concluir-, decídete, es el momento, y no te eches atrás… ¿qué quieres hacer? ¿Deseas volver con ella a Toulouse?»

«¡Que no!, te digo. ¡Que no y que no!» Esa fue su respuesta. Rotunda.

«¡De acuerdo! – dije yo entonces-. Pero en ese caso, si de verdad no quieres volver con ella nunca, lo mejor, en mi opinión, sería que te marcharas a ganarte las habichuelas, durante un tiempo al menos, al extranjero. De ese modo te librarás de ella de verdad… No te va a seguir hasta allí, ¿no?… Aún eres joven… Has recuperado la salud… Has descansado… Te daremos algo de dinero, ¡y buen viaje!… ¡Ésa es mi opinión! Como comprenderás, aquí, además, no tienes porvenir… No puedes seguir aquí siempre…»

Si me hubiera escuchado, si se hubiese marchado entonces, me habría venido muy bien, me habría dado una alegría. Pero no se fue.

«Anda, Ferdinand, ¡te burlas de mí!… -respondió-. No está bien, a mi edad… Mírame bien, ¡anda!…» Ya no quería marcharse. Estaba cansado de los garbeos, en una palabra.

«No quiero ir a ninguna parte… -repetía-. Digas lo que digas… Hagas lo que hagas… No me iré…»

Así mismo respondía a mi amistad. No obstante, insistí.

«¿Y si fuera a denunciarte, Madelon, supongamos, por lo de la tía Henrouille?… Tú mismo me lo dijiste, que era capaz de hacerlo…»

«Pues, ¡mala suerte! – respondió-. Que haga lo que quiera…»

Palabras así eran nuevas en su boca, porque la fatalidad, antes, no era su estilo…

«Por lo menos, ve a buscarte algún trabajillo ahí al lado, en una fábrica; así no estarás obligado a pasar todo el tiempo aquí con nosotros… Si llegan a buscarte, tendremos tiempo de avisarte.»

Parapine estaba totalmente de acuerdo conmigo al respecto e incluso, en aquella ocasión, volvió a hablar un poco. Tenía, pues, que parecerle de lo más grave y urgente lo que nos ocurría. Tuvimos que ingeniárnosla entonces para colocarlo, disimularlo, ocultarlo, a Robinson. Entre nuestras relaciones figuraba un industrial de los alrededores, un chapista que nos estaba agradecido por pequeños favores de lo más delicados, que le habíamos hecho en momentos críticos. No tuvo inconveniente en tomar a Robinson de prueba para la pintura a mano. Era un currelo fino, suave y bien pagado.

«Léon -le dijimos la mañana que empezaba a trabajar-, no hagas el idiota en tu nuevo trabajo, no andes contando tus ideas ridículas para que te fichen… Llega a la hora… No te vayas antes que los demás… Saluda a todo el mundo al llegar… Pórtate bien, en una palabra. Es un taller decente y vas recomendado…»

Pero nada, lo ficharon en seguida, de todos modos, y no por culpa suya, sino por un chivato de un taller cercano que lo había visto entrar en el gabinete privado del patrón. Fue suficiente. Informe. Malas intenciones. Despido.

Conque ahí lo teníamos de vuelta, a Robinson, otra vez, sin empleo, unos días después. ¡Fatalidad!

Y, además, empezó a toser otra vez casi el mismo día. Lo auscultamos y descubrimos toda una serie de estertores a lo largo del pulmón derecho. No le quedaba más remedio que guardar reposo.

Eso sucedió un sábado por la noche justo antes de cenar; entonces alguien preguntó por mí en el salón de la entrada.

Una mujer, me anunciaron.

Era ella con un sombrerito muy elegante y guantes. Lo recuerdo bien. No hacía falta preámbulo, no podía ser más oportuna. La puse al corriente.

«Madelon -le dije lo primero-, si es a Léon a quien desea ver, le aviso ya desde ahora que no vale la pena que insista, puede dar media vuelta… Está enfermo de los pulmones y de la cabeza… Bastante grave, por cierto… No puede usted verlo… Además, es que no tiene nada que decirle a usted…»

«¿Ni siquiera a mí?», insistió.

«No, ni siquiera a usted… Sobre todo a usted…», añadí.

Creí que iba a saltar de nuevo. No, se limitó a mover la cabeza, allí, delante de mí, de derecha a izquierda, con los labios apretados, y con los ojos intentaba encontrarme de nuevo donde me había dejado en su recuerdo. Yo ya no estaba allí. Me había desplazado, también yo, en el recuerdo. En la situación en que nos encontrábamos, un hombre, un cachas, me habría dado miedo, pero de ella no tenía yo nada que temer. Yo le podía, como se suele decir. Siempre había deseado meterle un buen cate a una cabeza presa así de la cólera para ver cómo dan vueltas las cabezas encolerizadas en esos casos. Eso o un hermoso cheque es lo que hace falta para ver de golpe cambiar todas las pasiones que se enroscan en una cabeza. Es tan bello como una hermosa maniobra a vela sobre un mar agitado. Toda la persona se ladea como azotada por un viento nuevo. Yo quería ver una cosa así.

Hacía veinte años por lo menos, que me perseguía ese deseo. En la calle, en el café, en todas partes donde la gente más o menos agresiva, quisquillosa y fanfarrona, se pelea. Pero nunca me había atrevido por miedo a los golpes y sobre todo por la vergüenza que acompaña a los golpes. Pero aquella ocasión, por una vez, era magnífica.

«¿Te vas a ir de una vez?», fui y le dije, sólo para excitarla un poco más aún, ponerla a tono.

Ella ya no me reconocía, de hablarle así. Se puso a sonreír, del modo más horripilante, como si me

considerara ridículo y muy despreciable… «¡Zas! ¡Zas!» Le pegué dos guantazos como para dejar sin sentido a un asno.

Fue a caer redonda sobre el gran diván rosa de enfrente, contra la pared, con la cabeza entre las manos. Respiraba entrecortadamente y gemía como un perrito apaleado. Y después, pareció como si reflexionara y de repente se levantó, con agilidad, y cruzó la puerta sin volver siquiera la cabeza. Yo no había visto nada. Vuelta a empezar.

Pero de nada nos sirvió lo que hicimos, era más astuta que todos nosotros juntos. La prueba es que volvió a verlo, a su Robinson, como quiso… El primero que los descubrió juntos fue Parapine. Estaban en la terraza de un café frente a la Gare de l'Est.

Yo me lo figuraba ya, que se volvían a ver, pero no quería dar la impresión otra vez de interesarme por sus relaciones. No era asunto mío, en una palabra. Él cumplía con su deber en el manicomio y muy bien, por cierto, con los paralíticos, currelo ingrato si los hay, limpiándolos, lavándolos, cambiándoles la muda, dándoles palique. No podíamos pedirle más.

Si aprovechaba las tardes que yo lo enviaba a París, a hacer recados, para volver a verla, a su Madelon, era asunto suyo. El caso es que no habíamos vuelto a verla, después de lo de las bofetadas, en Vigny-sur-Seine, a Madelon. Pero yo pensaba que debía de haberle contado marranadas sobre mí.

Yo ya no le hablaba ni siquiera de Toulouse, a Robinson, como si nada de todo aquello hubiese sucedido nunca.

Seis meses pasaron así, mejor o peor, y después se produjo una vacante en nuestro personal y de repente necesitamos con urgencia una enfermera especializada en masajes, la nuestra se había marchado sin avisar para casarse.

Gran número de jóvenes hermosas se presentaron para aquel puesto, con lo que nuestro único problema fue no saber a cuál elegir de entre tantas criaturas sólidas de todas las nacionalidades que acudieron en tropel a Vigny, en cuanto apareció nuestro anuncio. Al final, nos decidimos por una eslovaca llamada Sophie cuya carne, cuyo porte, ágil y tierno a la vez, cuya divina salud, nos parecieron, reconozcámoslo, irresistibles.

Conocía, aquella Sophie, pocas palabras en francés, pero yo, por mi parte, estaba dispuesto, era lo menos que podía hacer, a darle clases sin pérdida de tiempo. Por cierto, que, en contacto con ella, recuperé el gusto por la enseñanza. Sin embargo, Baryton había hecho todo lo posible para que me asqueara. ¡Impenitencia! Pero, ¡qué juventud también! ¡Qué ardor!;Qué musculatura! ¡Qué excusa! ¡Elástica! ¡Nerviosa! ¡De lo más asombrosa! No menoscababan aquella belleza ninguno de esos pudores, verdaderos o falsos, que tanto molestan en las conversaciones demasiado occidentales. Por mi parte, mi admiración era, a decir verdad, infinita. De músculos en músculos, por grupos anatómicos, avanzaba yo… Por vertientes musculares, por regiones… No me cansaba de perseguir ese vigor concertado y al mismo tiempo suelto, repartido en haces sucesivamente huidizos y consistentes, al tacto… Bajo la piel aterciopelada, tersa, relajada, milagrosa…

La era de esos gozos vivos, de las grandes armonías innegables, fisiológicas, comparativas, está aún por venir… El cuerpo, divinidad sobada por mis vergonzosas manos… Manos de hombre honrado, cura desconocido… Permiso primero de la Muerte y las Palabras… ¡Cuántas cursilerías apestosas! El hombre distinguido va a echar un polvo embadurnado con una espesa mugre de símbolos y acolchado hasta la médula… Y después, ¡que pase lo que pase! ¡Buen asunto! La economía de no excitarse, al fin y al cabo, sino con reminiscencias… Se poseen las reminiscencias, se pueden comprar, hermosas y espléndidas, una vez por todas, las reminiscencias… La vida es algo más complicado, la de las formas humanas sobre todo. Atroz aventura. No hay otra más desesperada. Al lado de ese vicio de las formas perfectas, la cocaína no es sino un pasatiempo para jefes de estación.

Pero, ¡volvamos a nuestra Sophie! Su simple presencia parecía una audacia en nuestra casa enfurruñada, atemorizada y equívoca.

Tras un tiempo de vida en común, seguíamos contentos, desde luego, de contarla entre nuestras enfermeras, pero no podíamos, sin embargo, por menos de temer que un día se pusiera a descomponer el conjunto de nuestras infinitas prudencias o simplemente tomara conciencia una mañana de nuestra lastimosa realidad…

¡Ignoraba aún, Sophie, la suma de nuestros encenagados abandonos! ¡Un hatajo de fracasados! La admirábamos, viva junto a nosotros, por el simple hecho de alzarse, venir a nuestra mesa, volverse a marchar… Nos hechizaba…

Y, todas las veces que hacía esos gestos tan sencillos, sentíamos sorpresa y gozo. Hacíamos como progresos de poesía sólo con admirarla por ser tan bella y tanto más inconsciente que nosotros. El ritmo de su vida brotaba de fuentes distintas de las nuestras… Rastreras para siempre, las nuestras, babosas.

Aquella fuerza alegre, precisa y suave a la vez, que la animaba desde la cabellera hasta los tobillos nos turbaba, nos inquietaba de modo encantador, pero nos inquietaba, ésa es la palabra.

Nuestro áspero saber sobre las cosas de este mundo hacía ascos a ese gozo, aun cuando el instinto saliera ganando, siempre ahí el saber, temeroso en el fondo, refugiado en el sótano de la existencia, acostumbrado a lo peor, por experiencia.

Tenía, Sophie, esos andares alados, ágiles y precisos, que se encuentran, tan frecuentes, casi habituales, en las mujeres de América, los andares de los elegidos del porvenir, a quienes la vida lleva, ambiciosa y ligera aún, hacia nuevas formas de aventuras… Velero con tres mástiles de alegría tierna rumbo al Infinito…

Parapine, por su parte, pese a no ser lírico precisamente en materia de atracción, se sonreía a sí mismo, cuando ella había salido. El simple hecho de contemplarla te sentaba bien en el alma. Sobre todo a mí, para ser justos, consumiéndome de deseo.

Para sorprenderla, hacerla perder un poco de esa soberbia, de ese como poder y prestigio que había adquirido sobre mí, Sophie, rebajarla, en una palabra, humanizarla un poco a nuestra mezquina medida, yo entraba en su habitación mientras ella dormía.

Ofrecía un espectáculo muy distinto entonces, Sophie, familiar y, sin embargo, sorprendente, tranquilizador también. Sin ostentación, casi sin tapar, atravesada en la cama, con las piernas en desorden, carnes húmedas y abiertas, forcejeaba con la fatiga…

Se cebaba en el sueño, Sophie, en las profundidades del cuerpo, roncaba. Ése era el único momento en que yo la encontraba a mi alcance. No más hechizos. No más cachondeo. Pura y simple seriedad. Se afanaba en el revés, por así decir, de la existencia, extrayéndole vida… Tragona era en esos momentos, borracha incluso a fuerza de absorberla. Había que verla tras aquellas sesiones de soñarrera, toda hinchada aún y, bajo su piel rosa, los órganos que no cesaban de extasiarse. Estaba graciosa entonces y ridícula como todo el mundo. Titubeaba de felicidad durante unos minutos más y después toda la luz del día caía sobre ella y, como tras el paso de una nube demasiado cargada, recobraba el vuelo, gloriosa, liberada…

Da gusto echar un palo así. Es muy agradable tocar ese momento en que la materia se vuelve vida. Subes hasta la llanura infinita que se abre ante los hombres. Gritas: ¡Aaah! ¡Y aaah! Gozas todo lo que puedes ahí encima y es como un gran desierto…

De entre nosotros, sus amigos más que sus patronos, yo era, creo, el más íntimo. Ahora, que me engañaba puntualmente, he de reconocerlo, con el enfermero del pabellón de los agitados, antiguo bombero, por mi bien, según me explicaba, para no agotarme, por los trabajos intelectuales que yo estaba haciendo y que armonizaban bastante mal con los accesos de su temperamento. Lo que se dice por mi bien. Me ponía los cuernos por higiene. Era muy dueña.

Todo aquello, en definitiva, sólo me habría causado placer, pero no podía quitarme de la conciencia la historia de Madelon. Acabé contándoselo todo un día, a Sophie, para ver qué decía. Me desahogué un poco, al contarle mis problemas. Estaba harto, desde luego, de las disputas interminables y de los rencores provocados por sus amores desgraciados y Sophie me daba la razón en todo aquello.

Ya que habíamos sido amigos, Robinson y yo, le parecía a ella que debíamos reconciliarnos todos, sencillamente, como buenos amigos, y lo más pronto posible. Era el consejo de un buen corazón. Tienen muchos corazones buenos así, en Europa central. Sólo, que no estaba demasiado al corriente de los caracteres ni de las reacciones de la gente de por aquí. Con las mejores intenciones del mundo, me aconsejaba lo menos indicado. Me di cuenta de que se había equivocado, pero ya era demasiado tarde.

«Deberías volver a verla, a Madelon -me aconsejó-, debe de ser buena chica en el fondo, por lo que me has contado… Sólo, que tú la provocaste, ¡y estuviste de lo más brutal y asqueroso con ella!… Le debes excusas e incluso un regalo bonito para hacerla olvidar…» Así se hacía en su país. En una palabra, iniciativas muy corteses me aconsejaba, pero poco prácticas.

Seguí sus consejos, sobre todo porque vislumbraba, al cabo de todos aquellos melindres, acercamientos diplomáticos y remilgos, una posible partida entre cuatro que sería de lo más divertida, vamos, renovadora incluso. Mi amistad se volvía, siento decirlo, bajo la presión de los acontecimientos y de la edad, solapadamente erótica. Traición. Sophie me ayudaba, sin quererlo, a traicionar en aquel momento. Era demasiado curiosa como para no gustar de los peligros, Sophie. De madera excelente, nada protestona, persona que no intentaba minimizar las ocasiones de la vida, que no desconfiaba por principio de ésta. Mi estilo mismo. Más lanzada aún. Comprendía la necesidad de los cambios en las distracciones de la jodienda. Disposición aventurera, más rara que la hostia, hay que reconocerlo, entre las mujeres. No había duda, habíamos elegido bien.

Le habría gustado, y a mí me parecía muy natural, que pudiera darle algunos detalles sobre el físico de Madelon. Temía parecer torpe junto a una francesa, en la intimidad, sobre todo por el gran renombre de artistas en ese terreno que se les ha atribuido a las francesas en el extranjero. En cuanto a soportar, además, a Robinson, para complacerme, y se acabó, consentiría. No la excitaba lo más mínimo, Robinson, según me decía, pero, en resumidas cuentas, estábamos de acuerdo. Era lo principal. Bien.

Esperé un poco a que una buena ocasión se presentara para decir dos palabras a Robinson sobre mi proyecto de reconciliación general. Una mañana en que estaba en el economato copiando las observaciones médicas en el registro, el momento me pareció oportuno para mi intento y lo interrumpí para preguntarle con toda sencillez qué le parecería una iniciativa por mi parte ante Madelon para que quedara olvidado el violento pasado reciente… Y si podría en la misma ocasión presentarle a Sophie, mi nueva amiga… Y si no pensaba, por último, que había llegado el momento de que todos tuviéramos una explicación de una vez y como buenos amigos.

Primero vaciló un poco, bien lo advertí, y después me respondió, pero sin entusiasmo, que no veía inconveniente… En el fondo, creo que Madelon le había anunciado que yo intentaría volver a verla con un pretexto u otro. De la bofetada del día en que ella había venido a Vigny no dije ni pío.

No podía arriesgarme a que me echara una bronca entonces y me llamase bestia en público, pues, al fin y al cabo, si bien éramos amigos desde hacía mucho, en aquella casa estaba a mis órdenes, de todos modos. Lo

primero, la autoridad.

Era el momento de dar ese paso, el mes de enero. Decidimos, porque era más cómodo, que nos encontraríamos todos en París un domingo, que iríamos después al cine juntos y que tal vez pasaríamos primero un momento por la verbena de Batignolles, siempre que no hiciese demasiado frío fuera. Robinson había prometido llevarla a la verbena de Batignolles. Se pirraba por las verbenas, Madelon, según me dijo él. ¡Venía al pelo! Para la primera vez que volvíamos a vernos, sería mejor que fuese con ocasión de una fiesta.

¡La verdad es que nos dimos un atracón de verbena con los ojos! ¡Y con la cabeza también! ¡Bim y bum! ¡Y más bum! ¡Y empujones por aquí! ¡Y empujones por allá! ¡Y venga gritos! Y ahí nos teníais a todos en el barullo, ¡con luces, jaleo y demás! ¡Y viva el tino, la audacia y el cachondeo! ¡Hale! Cada cual intentaba parecer animado, pero un poco distante, de todos modos, para hacer ver a la gente que normalmente nos divertíamos en otra parte, en lugares mucho más caros, *expensifs* como se dice en inglés.

Astutos y alegres cachondos aparentábamos ser, pese al cierzo, humillante también, y ese miedo deprimente a ser demasiado generosos con las distracciones y tener que lamentarlo mañana, tal vez durante toda una semana incluso.

Un gran eructo de música sube de la noria. No consigue vomitar su vals de *Fausto,* la noria, pero hace todo lo posible. Le baja, el vals, y le vuelve a subir en torno al techo redondo, que gira con sus mil tartas de luz en bombillas. No es cómodo. El órgano sufre de música en el tubo de su vientre. ¿Qué tal un trozo de turrón? ¿O, mejor, el tiro al blanco? ¡A elegir!…

Entre nosotros, la más hábil, con el ala del sombrero alzada por delante, en el tiro, era Madelon. «¡Mira! – dijo a Robinson-. ¡Yo no tiemblo! ¡Y eso que hemos bebido de lo lindo!» Con eso os hacéis idea del tono exacto de la conversación. Acabábamos de salir del restaurante. «¡Otra más!» ¡Madelon la ganó, la botella de champán! «¡Ping y pong! ¡Y blanco!» Entonces le hice una apuesta: a que no me atrapaba en los coches de choque. «¿Que no? – respondió, muy animada-. ¡Cada cual al suyo!» ¡Y hale! Yo estaba contento de que hubiese aceptado. Era un medio de aproximarme a ella. Sophie no era celosa. Tenía motivos.

Conque Robinson subió detrás con Madelon en un coche y yo en otro delante con Sophie, ¡y nos pegamos una de golpes! ¡Toma castaña! ¡Toma ciribicundia! Pero en seguida vi que no le gustaba eso de que la zarandearan, a Madelon. Tampoco a él, por cierto, a Robinson, le gustaba ya eso. La verdad es que no estaba a gusto con nosotros. En el pasillo, cuando nos agarrábamos a las barandillas, unos marineros se pusieron a sobarnos por la fuerza, a hombres y mujeres, y nos hicieron proposiciones. Nos entró canguelo. Nos defendimos. Nos reímos. Llegaban de todos lados, los sobones, y, además, ¡con música, arrebato y cadencia! Recibes en esas especies de toneles con ruedas tales sacudidas, que cada vez que te dan se te salen los ojos de las órbitas. ¡Alegría, vamos! ¡Violencia con cachondeo! ¡Todo un acordeón de placeres! Me habría gustado hacer las paces con Madelon antes de abandonar la verbena. Yo insistía, pero ella ya no respondía a mis iniciativas. Nada, que no. Me ponía mala cara incluso. Me mantenía a distancia. Yo estaba perplejo. No estaba de humor, Madelon. Yo había esperado otra cosa. Físicamente había cambiado también, por cierto, y en todo.

Observé que, al lado de Sophie, desmerecía, estaba mustia. La amabilidad le sentaba mejor, pero parecía que ahora supiese cosas superiores. Eso me irritó. Con gusto la habría abofeteado de nuevo para hacerla entrar en razón o, si no, que me dijera, a mí, eso superior que sabía.

Pero, ¡a sonreír tocaban! Estábamos en la verbena, ¡no habíamos ido a lloriquear! ¡Había que celebrarlo!

Había encontrado trabajo en casa de una tía suya, iba contando a Sophie, después, mientras caminábamos. En la Rué du Rocher, una tía corsetera. No íbamos a ponerlo en duda.

No era difícil de comprender, desde ese momento, que para lo de la reconciliación el encuentro había sido un fracaso. Y para mi plan también, había sido un fracaso. Un desastre incluso.

Había sido un error volver a verse. Sophie, por su parte, aún no comprendía bien la situación. No se daba cuenta de que, al volver a vernos, acabábamos de complicar las cosas… Robinson debería haberme dicho, haberme avisado, que era terca hasta ese punto… ¡Una lástima! ¡En fin! ¡Catapún! ¡Chin, chin! ¡Ánimo, que no se diga! ¡Hale, a la oruga! Yo lo propuse, invitaba yo, para intentar acercarme una vez más a Madelon. Pero se escabullía constantemente, me evitaba, aprovechaba la multitud para subirse a otra banqueta, delante, con Robinson; estaba yo guapo. Olas y remolinos de obscuridad nos atontaban. No había nada que hacer, concluí para mis adentros. Y Sophie ya era de mi opinión. Comprendía que en todo aquello había sido yo víctima de mi imaginación de obseso y salido. «¡Mira! ¡Está ofendida! Me parece que lo mejor sería dejarlos tranquilos ahora… Nosotros podríamos quizás ir a dar una vuelta por el Chabanais antes de volver a casa…» Era una propuesta que le gustaba mucho, a Sophie, porque había oído hablar mucho del Chabanais, cuando aún se encontraba en Praga, y estaba deseando conocerlo, el Chabanais, para poder juzgar por sí misma. Pero calculamos que nos saldría demasiado caro, el Chabanais, para la cantidad de dinero que habíamos cogido. Conque tuvimos que interesarnos de nuevo por la verbena.

Robinson, mientras estábamos en la oruga, debía de haber tenido una escena con Madelon. Bajaron de lo más irritados, los dos, de aquel carrusel. Estaba visto que aquel día estaba ella de mírame y no me toques. Para calmar los ánimos, les propuse una distracción muy entretenida: un concurso de pesca al cuello de las botellas. Madelon aceptó refunfuñando. Y, sin embargo, nos ganó todo lo que quiso. Llegaba con su anillo justo encima del cuello de la botella, ¡e iba y te lo metía en menos que canta un gallo! ¡Tris, tras! Listo. El hombre de la caseta no daba crédito a sus ojos. Le entregó, de premio, «una media Grand-Duc de Malvoison». Para que os hagáis idea del tino que tenía. Pero, aun así, no quedó satisfecha. No la iba a beber… nos anunció

al instante… Que si era malo… Conque fue Robinson quien la abrió para beberla. ¡Zas! ¡Y empinando el codo bien! Una gracia en su caso, pues no bebía, por así decir, nunca.

Después pasamos delante de la boda del pim pam pum. ¡Pan! ¡Pan! Peleamos con pelotas duras. Había que ver qué poco tino tenía yo… Felicité a Robinson. Me ganaba a cualquier juego también él. Pero tampoco lo hacía sonreír su tino. Estaba visto: parecía que los hubiéramos llevado por la fuerza a los dos. No había modo de animarlos, de alegrarlos. «¡Que estamos en la verbena!», grité; por una vez me fallaba la inventiva.

Pero les daba igual que yo los animara y les repitiese esas cosas al oído. No me oían. «Pero, ¿qué juventud es ésta? – les pregunté-. ¡A quien se le diga…! ¿Es que ya no se divierte la juventud? ¿Qué tendría que hacer yo, entonces, que tengo diez castañas más que vosotros? ¡Pues sí!» Entonces me miraban, Madelon y él, como si se encontraran ante un intoxicado, un baboso, y ni siquiera valiese la pena responderme… Como si ni siquiera valiese la pena hablarme, pues ya no comprendería, seguro, lo que pudieran explicarme… Nada de nada… ¿Tendrían razón?, me pregunté entonces y miré, muy inquieto, a nuestro alrededor, a la otra gente.

Pero los otros hacían lo que convenía, por su parte, para divertirse, no como nosotros ahí, haciéndonos pajas mentales con nuestra pena, penita, pena. ¡Ni hablar del peluquín! ¡Menudo si la gozaban con la fiesta! ¡Por un franco aquí!… ¡Cincuenta céntimos allá!… Luz… Bombo, música y caramelos… Como moscas se agitaban, con sus larvillas incluso en los brazos, bien lívidos, pálidos bebés, que desaparecían, a fuerza de palidez, entre tanta luz. Un poco de rosa sólo en torno a la nariz les quedaba, a los bebés, en el sitio de los catarros y los besos.

Entre todas las casetas, lo reconocí en seguida, al pasar, el «Tiro de las Naciones», un recuerdo, no les comenté nada a los otros. Quince años ya, me dije, sólo para mis adentros. Quince años han pasado ya… ¡La tira! ¡La cantidad de amiguetes que ha perdido uno por el camino! Nunca habría creído que se hubiera librado del barro en que estaba hundido allí, en Saint-Cloud, el «Tiro de las Naciones»… Pero estaba bien restaurado, casi nuevo, en una palabra, ahora, con música y todo. Muy bien. No cesaban de tirar. Una caseta de tiro está siempre muy solicitada. El huevo había vuelto también, como yo, en el centro, casi en el aire, a brincar. Costaba dos francos. Pasamos de largo, teníamos demasiado frío como para probar, más valía caminar. Pero no era porque nos faltase dinero, teníamos aún los bolsillos llenos, de moneda tintineante, la musiquilla del bolso.

Yo habría probado cualquier cosa, en aquel momento, para que cambiásemos de ánimo, pero nadie ponía nada de su parte. Si hubiera estado Parapine con nosotros, habría sido aún peor seguramente, ya que se ponía triste en cuanto había gente. Por fortuna, se había quedado de guardia en el manicomio. Por mi parte, yo me arrepentía de haber ido. Madelon se echó entonces a reír, pese a todo, pero no era divertida su risa ni mucho menos. Robinson lanzaba risitas a su lado para no desentonar. De repente, Sophie se puso a contar chistes. Lo que faltaba.

Al pasar por delante de la caseta del fotógrafo, nos vio, el artista, vacilantes. No queríamos fotografiarnos, salvo Sophie tal vez. Pero acabamos expuestos ante su aparato, de todos modos, a fuerza de vacilar ante la puerta. Nos sometimos a sus lentas instrucciones, ahí, sobre la pasarela de cartón, que debía de haber construido él mismo, de un supuesto barco *La Belle-France.* Estaba escrito en los falsos salvavidas. Nos quedamos así un buen rato, con los ojos clavados en el horizonte desafiando el porvenir. Otros clientes esperaban impacientes a que bajáramos de la pasarela y ya se vengaban considerándonos feos y nos lo decían, además, y en voz alta.

Se aprovechaban de que no podíamos movernos. Pero Madelon no tenía miedo, los puso de vuelta y media con todo el acento del Mediodía. Bien clarito. Respuesta sabrosa.

Magnesio. Todos parpadeamos. Una foto cada uno. Más feos que antes. Estábamos más feos que antes. Calaba la lluvia por la lona. Teníamos los pies molidos de cansancio y congelados. El viento se nos había colado, mientras posábamos, por todos los agujeros, hasta el punto de que el abrigo parecía inexistente.

Había que ponerse de nuevo a deambular entre las casetas. Yo no me atrevía a proponer que volviésemos a Vigny. Era demasiado temprano. El sentimental órgano del tiovivo aprovechó que estábamos ya tiritando para provocarnos más tembleque aún, nervioso. Del fracaso del mundo entero se cachondeaba, el instrumento. Cantaba a la derrota entre sus tubos plateados y la melodía iba a diñarla en la noche de al lado, a través de las calles meadas que bajan de las Buttes.

Las marmotillas de Bretaña tosían mucho más que el invierno pasado, cierto es, cuando acababan de llegar a París. Sus muslos jaspeados de verde y azul eran los que adornaban, como podían, los arreos de los caballitos. Los chorbos de Auvernia que las invitaban, prudentes empleados de Correos, sólo se las tiraban con condón, era sabido. No estaban dispuestos a pescarlas por segunda vez. Las marmotas se retorcían esperando el amor en el estrépito asquerosamente melodioso del tiovivo. Un poco mareadas estaban, pero posaban, de todos modos, con seis grados de temperatura, porque era el momento supremo, el momento de probar su juventud con el amante definitivo, que tal vez estuviera ahí, conquistado ya, acurrucado entre los gilipuertas de aquella multitud aterida. No se atrevía aún, el Amor… Todo llega, sin embargo, como en el cine, y la felicidad también. Que te adore una sola noche y nunca más se separará de ti, ese hijo de papá… Es algo visto y se acabó. Además, es que está bien, es que es guapo, es que es rico.

En el quiosco de al lado, junto al metro, a la vendedora, por su parte, le importaba un pepino el porvenir, se rascaba su antigua conjuntivitis y se la infectaba despacio con las uñas. Es un placer, obscuro y gratuito. Ya hacía seis años que le duraba, lo del ojo, y cada vez le picaba más.

Los transeúntes apiñados en grupo contra el frío que pelaba se apretujaban para derretirse en torno a la rifa. Sin conseguirlo. Brasero de culos. Entonces se largaban corriendo y saltaban para calentarse en el cogollo de multitud que formaban los de enfrente, delante del ternero con dos cabezas.

Protegido por el urinario, un muchachito a quien el paro acechaba decía su precio a una pareja de provincias, que se sonrojaba de emoción. El guri que velaba por las buenas costumbres había comprendido el tejemaneje, pero se la traía floja, su cita de momento era a la salida del café Miseux. Hacía una semana que lo acechaba. Tenía que ser en el estanco o en la trastienda del vendedor de libros verdes de al lado. En cualquier caso, hacía tiempo que le habían dado el soplo. Uno de los dos procuraba, según contaban, menores, que aparentaban vender flores. Más anónimos. El vendedor de castañas de la esquina «soplaba» también, por su parte, a la bofia. Qué remedio, por cierto. Todo lo que había en la acera pertenecía a la policía.

Esa especie de ametralladora que se oía, furiosa, por este lado, a ráfagas, era simplemente la moto del tipo del «Disco de la Muerte». Un «evadido», según decían, pero no era seguro. En cualquier caso, ya había reventado su tienda dos veces, aquí mismo, y también dos años antes en Toulouse. ¡A ver si se estrellaba de una vez con su aparato! ¡A ver si se rompía la jeta de una vez y la columna también y que no se hablara más del asunto! De oírlo, ¡te entraban ganas de matarlo! El tranvía también, por cierto, con su campanilla; ya había atropellado a dos viejos de Bicetre, a la altura de las casetas, en menos de un mes. El autobús, en cambio, era tranquilo. Llegaba a la chita callando a la Place Pigalle, con muchas precauciones, titubeando más bien, tocando la bocina, jadeando, con sus cuatro personas dentro, muy prudentes y lentas a la hora de salir, como monaguillos.

De mostradores a grupos y de tiovivos a rifas, a fuerza de deambular, habíamos llegado hasta el final de la verbena, el enorme vacío negro como la pez donde las familias iban a hacer pipí… ¡Media vuelta, pues! Al volver sobre nuestros pasos, comimos castañas para que nos diera sed. Dolor en la boca nos dio, pero no sed. Un gusano también en las castañas, uno muy mono. Se lo encontró Madelon, como hecho a propósito. E incluso desde aquel momento fue cuando las cosas empezaron a ir francamente mal entre nosotros, hasta entonces nos conteníamos un poco, pero lo de la castaña la puso absolutamente furiosa.

En el momento en que se acercaba al arroyo para escupirlo, el gusano, Léon le dijo, además, algo como para impedírselo, ya no sé qué, ni por qué le dio eso, pero de repente eso de ir a escupir así no le gustaba a Léon. Le preguntó, como un tonto, si había encontrado una pepita… No había que hacerle una pregunta así… Y entonces va y se le ocurre a Sophie meterse en su discusión, no comprendía por qué regañaban… Quería saberlo.

Conque eso los irritó aún más, verse interrumpidos por Sophie, una extranjera, lógicamente. Justo entonces un grupo de alborotadores pasó entre nosotros y nos separó. Eran jóvenes que hacían la carrera, en realidad, pero con mímicas, pitos y toda clase de gritos de alma que lleva el diablo. Cuando pudimos juntarnos, seguían regañando, Robinson y ella.

«Ha llegado el momento -pensaba yo- de regresar… Si los dejamos juntos aquí unos minutos más, nos van a armar un escándalo en plena verbena… ¡Ya basta por hoy!» Todo había fallado, había que reconocerlo. «¿Quieres que nos vayamos? – le propuse. Entonces me miró como sorprendido. Sin embargo, me parecía la decisión más prudente e indicada-. ¿Es que no estáis hartos de la verbena así?», añadí. Entonces me indicó por señas que lo mejor era que preguntara primero su opinión a Madelon. No tenía yo inconveniente en preguntárselo, a Madelon, pero no me parecía muy oportuno.

«Pero, ¡si nos la llevamos con nosotros, a Madelon!», acabé diciendo.

«¿Que nos la llevamos? ¿Adonde quieres llevarla?», dijo él.

«Pues, ¡a Vigny, hombre!», respondí.

¡Era meter la pata!… Una vez más. Pero no podía echarme atrás, ya lo había dicho.

«¡Tenemos una habitación libre para ella en Vigny! – añadí-. ¡Nos sobran habitaciones, qué caramba!… Además, podemos tomar una cenita juntos, antes de irnos a acostar… ¡Será más alegre que aquí, donde nos estamos quedando, literalmente, congelados desde hace dos horas! No va a ser difícil…» No respondía nada, Madelon, a mis propuestas. Ni siquiera me miraba, mientras yo hablaba, pero, aun así, no se perdía ripio de lo que yo acababa de explicar. En fin, lo dicho dicho estaba.

Cuando me encontré un poco separado, ella se acercó a mí con disimulo para preguntarme si no sería que quería jugarle otra mala pasada invitándola a Vigny. No le respondí nada. No se puede razonar con una mujer celosa, como ella estaba, habría sido otro pretexto más para cuentos interminables. Y, además, yo no sabía exactamente de quién ni de qué estaba celosa. Con frecuencia es difícil determinar esos sentimientos provocados por los celos. De todo, en una palabra, estaba celosa, me imagino, como todo el mundo.

Sophie no sabía ya qué hacer, pero seguía insistiendo para mostrarse amable. Había cogido del brazo incluso a Madelon, pero ésta estaba demasiado rabiosa y contenta, además, de estarlo como para dejarse distraer por amabilidades. Nos escurrimos con mucho trabajo a través del gentío para llegar hasta el tranvía, en la Place Clichy. En el preciso momento en que íbamos a coger el tranvía, una nube descargó sobre la plaza y empezó a llover a mares. El cielo se derramó.

En un instante todos los autos fueron cogidos al asalto. «¿No irás a ponerme en evidencia delante de la gente?… ¿Eh, Léon? – oí a Madelon preguntarle a media voz junto a nosotros. Aquello se ponía feo-. ¿Conque ya estás harto de verme, eh?… ¡Anda, dilo que estás harto de verme! – proseguía-. ¡Dilo! ¡Y eso que no me ves a menudo!… Pero prefieres estar a solas con ellos dos, ¿eh?…

Apuesto algo a que os acostáis juntos, cuando yo no estoy… ¡Dilo, que prefieres estar con ellos y no conmigo!… Dilo, que yo te oiga… -Y después se quedaba sin decir nada, la cara se le cerraba en una mueca en torno a la nariz, que le subía y le tiraba de la boca. Estábamos esperando en la acera-. ¿Has visto cómo me tratan tus amigos?… ¿Eh, Léon?», continuaba.

Pero Léon, hay que ser justos, no replicaba, no la provocaba, miraba para otro lado, a las fachadas y el bulevar y los coches.

Sin embargo, era un violento a ratos, Léon. Como Madelon veía que no daban resultado sus amenazas, lo hostigaba de otro modo y después con ternura, mientras esperaba. «Yo te quiero, Léon mío, ¿me oyes, que te quiero?… ¿Te das cuenta por lo menos de lo que he hecho por ti?… ¿Tal vez habría sido mejor que yo no viniera hoy?… ¿Me quieres, de todos modos, un poquito, Léon? No es posible que no me quieras nada… Tienes corazón, ¿no, Léon? Tienes un poco de corazón, de todos modos, ¿no, Léon?… Entonces, ¿por qué desprecias mi amor?… Habíamos tenido un sueño bonito juntos… ¡Anda que no eres cruel conmigo!… ¡Has despreciado mi sueño, Léon! ¡Lo has ensuciado!… ¡Ya puedes decir que lo has destruido, mi ideal!… Entonces no quieres que crea más en el amor, ¿eh? ¿Es eso lo que quieres de verdad?…» Todo le preguntaba, mientras la lluvia calaba el toldo del café.

Chorreaba entre la gente. Estaba visto, Madelon era como él me había advertido. No había inventado nada Robinson en lo referente a su carácter auténtico. No habría yo podido imaginar que hubiesen llegado tan rápido a semejantes intensidades sentimentales, así era.

Como los coches y todo el tráfico hacían mucho ruido en torno a nosotros, aproveché para decir unas palabras a Robinson al oído, de todos modos, sobre la situación, para intentar librarnos de ella ahora y acabar lo más rápido posible, ya que había sido un fracaso, zafarnos a la chita callando antes de que todo se agriara y que nos enfadásemos sin remedio. Era como para temerlo. «¿Quieres que te busque un pretexto yo? – le sugerí-. ¿Y que nos larguemos cada uno por nuestro lado?» «¡No se te ocurra! – me respondió él-. ¡No se te ocurra! ¡Podría darle un ataque aquí mismo y no podríamos con ella!» No insistí.

Al fin y al cabo, tal vez fuera eso lo que le daba gusto, que le echasen una bronca en público, a Robinson, y, además, que él la conocía mejor que yo. Cuando el diluvio amainaba, encontramos un taxi. Nos precipitamos y nos encontramos apretujados. Al principio, no nos decíamos nada. Estábamos mustios y, además, yo ya había metido la pata lo mío. Podía esperar un poquito antes de volver a empezar.

Léon y yo cogimos los transpórtales de delante y las dos mujeres ocuparon el fondo del taxi. Las noches de verbena hay embotellamientos en la carretera de Argenteuil, sobre todo hasta la Porte. Después hay que contar por lo menos una buena hora para llegar a Vigny por culpa del tráfico. No es cómodo permanecer una hora sin hablarse, mirándose de frente, sobre todo cuando es de noche, cuando vas inquieto a causa de los que te acompañan.

Sin embargo, si hubiéramos permanecido así, ofendidos, pero sin manifestarlo, no habría ocurrido nada. Hoy sigo siendo del mismo parecer, cuando lo pienso.

A fin de cuentas, fue culpa mía que volviéramos a hablar y que la disputa se reanudara al instante y con más fuerza. Con las palabras todas las precauciones son pocas; parecen mosquitas muertas, las palabras, no parecen peligros, desde luego, vientecillos más bien, ruiditos vocales, ni chicha ni limonada, y fáciles de recoger, en cuanto llegan a través del oído, por el enorme hastío, gris y difuso, del cerebro. No desconfiamos de las palabras y llega la desgracia.

Palabras hay escondidas, entre las otras, como guijarros. No se reconocen en especial y después van, sin embargo, y te hacen temblar la vida entera, en su fuerza y en su debilidad… Entonces viene el pánico… Una avalancha… Te quedas ahí, como un ahorcado, por encima de las emociones… Una tormenta que ha llegado, que ha pasado, demasiado fuerte para uno, tan violenta, que nunca la hubiera uno imaginado sólo con sentimientos… Así, pues, todas las precauciones son pocas con las palabras, ésa es mi conclusión. Pero, primero, voy a contar cómo fue…: el taxi seguía despacio tras el tranvía a causa de las obras… «Rrron…» y «rrron…», hacía. Una cuneta cada cien metros… Sólo, que yo no podía conformarme con eso, el tranvía delante. Yo, siempre charlatán e infantil, me impacientaba… Me resultaba insoportable aquella marcha de entierro y aquella indecisión por todas partes… Me apresuré a romper el silencio para preguntar a gritos por qué iba pisando huevos. Observé o, mejor, intenté observar, pues ya casi no se veía, en su rincón, a la izquierda, en el fondo del taxi, a Madelon. Mantenía la cara vuelta hacia fuera, hacia el paisaje, hacia la noche, a decir verdad. Comprobé con rencor que seguía tan terca.

Y yo tenía que hacer la puñeta, desde luego. Me dirigí a ella, sólo para que volviera la cara hacia mí.

«¡Oye, Madelon! – le pregunté-. ¿No tendrás un plan para que nos divirtamos que no te atreves a proponernos? ¿Quieres que nos detengamos en alguna parte antes de regresar? ¡Dilo sin falta!…»

«¡Divertirse! ¡Divertirse! – me respondió como insultada-. ¡Sólo pensáis en eso, vosotros! ¡En divertiros!…»

Y de pronto lanzó toda una serie de suspiros, profundos, conmovedores como pocos he oído en mi vida.

«¡Yo hago lo que puedo! – le respondí-. ¡Es domingo!»

«¿Y tú, Léon? – le preguntó entonces a él-. ¿Tú? ¿Haces tú también todo lo que puedes? ¿Eh?» Sin rodeos.

«¡Ya lo creo!», le respondió él.

Los miré a los dos en el momento en que pasábamos ante los faroles. La cólera en persona. Madelon se inclinó entonces como para besarlo. Estaba visto y bien visto que aquella tarde no íbamos a dejar de meter la pata ni una sola vez.

El taxi volvía a avanzar muy despacio por culpa de los camiones, en constante caravana por delante de nosotros. Eso le molestaba precisamente, a él, que lo besara, y la rechazó con bastante brusquedad, hay que reconocerlo. Desde luego, no era un gesto amable precisamente, sobre todo delante de nosotros.

Cuando llegamos al final de la Avenue de Clichy, a la Porte, era ya noche obscura, las tiendas estaban encendiendo las luces. Bajo el puente del ferrocarril, que resuena siempre tan fuerte, oí que volvía a preguntarle: «¿No quieres besarme, Léon?» Volvía a la carga. Él seguía sin responderle. De repente, ella se volvió hacia mí y me increpó a las claras. Lo que no podía soportar era la afrenta.

«¿Qué más le has hecho a Léon para que se haya vuelto tan malo? Anda, atrévete a decírmelo en seguida… ¿Qué le has contado?…» Asimismo me provocaba.

«¿Contarle? – le respondí-. ¡No le he contado nada!… ¡Yo no me meto en vuestras disputas!…»

Y lo más grande es que era verdad, que yo no le había contado nada en absoluto de ella, a Léon. Era muy dueño de quedarse con ella o separarse. No me incumbía, pero no valía la pena intentar convencerla, ya no se avenía a razones y volvimos a callarnos frente a frente, en el taxi, pero la atmósfera seguía tan cargada de bronca, que no se podía continuar así mucho rato. Había puesto, para hablarme, un tono de voz sordo, que nunca le había oído yo, un tono monótono también, como el de una persona del todo decidida. Echada hacia atrás como iba en el rincón del taxi, yo ya no podía apenas ver sus gestos y eso me fastidiaba mucho.

Sophie, entretanto, me tenía cogida la mano. Ya no sabía dónde meterse, Sophie, de repente, la pobre.

Cuando acabábamos de pasar Saint-Ouen, fue Madelon quien reanudó la sesión de quejas contra Léon y con una intensidad frenética, volviendo a hacerle preguntas interminables y en voz alta ahora a propósito de su afecto y su fidelidad. Para nosotros dos, Sophie y yo, era de lo más violento. Pero estaba tan soliviantada, que le daba absolutamente igual que la escucháramos: al contrario. Desde luego, yo me había lucido encerrándola en aquella jaula con nosotros, resonaba y eso le daba ganas, con su carácter, de hacernos la gran escena. Había sido otra iniciativa mía, muy ocurrente, lo del taxi…

Él, Léon, ya no reaccionaba. En primer lugar, estaba cansado por la tarde que acabábamos de pasar juntos y, además, siempre tenía sueño atrasado, era su enfermedad.

«¡Cálmate, mujer! – conseguí, de todos modos, hacerle entender a Madelon-. Ya reñiréis los dos al llegar… ¡Os sobra tiempo!…»

«¡Llegar! ¡Llegar! – me respondió entonces con un tono indescriptible-. ¿Llegar? No vamos a llegar nunca, ¡te lo digo yo!… Y, además, ¡que estoy harta de vuestros asquerosos modales! – prosiguió-. ¡Yo soy una chica decente!… ¡Valgo más que todos vosotros juntos, yo!… Hatajo de guarros. Ya podéis tomarme el pelo… ¡que no sois dignos de comprenderme!… ¡Estáis demasiado corrompidos, todos vosotros, para comprenderme!… ¡Ya no hay cosa limpia ni bonita que podáis comprender!»

Nos atacaba a fin de cuentas, en el amor propio y sin cesar, y de nada servía que yo permaneciera muy modosito en mi transportín, lo mejor posible, y sin lanzar ni un simple suspiro, para no excitarla más; a cada cambio de velocidad del taxi, volvía a lanzarse en trance. Basta una nimiedad en esos momentos para desencadenar lo peor y era como si gozara sólo con hacernos sufrir, ya no podía dejar de dar rienda suelta en seguida a su carácter y hasta el fondo.

«Pero, ¡no os creáis que esto va a quedar así! – siguió amenazándonos-. ¡Ni que vais a poder deshaceros de la chica a la chita callando! ¡Ah, no! ¿Eh? ¡No os lo vayáis a creer! No, ¡os va a salir el tiro por la culata! Desgraciados, que es lo que sois, todos… ¡Me habéis hecho una desdichada! ¡Os vais a enterar, con todo lo asquerosos que sois!…»

De repente, se inclinó hacia Robinson y lo cogió del abrigo y se puso a zarandearlo con los dos brazos. Él no hacía nada para desasirse. No iba yo a intervenir. Era casi como para pensar que le daba placer, a Robinson, verla excitarse un poco más aún en relación con él. Él se reía burlón, no era natural, oscilaba, mientras ella lo ponía verde, como un monigote, con la cabeza gacha y fláccida.

En el momento en que yo iba a hacer, pese a todo, un gesto de reconvención para interrumpir aquellas groserías, ella se me volvió y no queráis ver lo que me soltó incluso a mí… Lo que se tenía callado desde hacía mucho… ¡Me lanzó una buena, la verdad! Y delante de todo el mundo. «Tú, ¡estáte quieto, sátiro! – fue y me dijo-. ¡No te metas en donde no te llaman! ¡No te aguanto más violencias, amigo! ¿Me oyes? ¿Eh? ¡Es que no te las aguanto más! Si vuelves a levantarme la mano una sola vez, ¡te va a enseñar, Madelon, cómo hay que comportarse en la vida!… ¡A poner los cuernos a los amigos y después pegar a sus mujeres!… ¡Será jeta, el cabrón este! ¿Es que no te da vergüenza?» Léon, por su parte, al oír aquellas verdades, pareció despertar un poco. Dejó de reírse. Yo me pregunté incluso por un momentito si no iríamos a provocarnos, a canearnos, pero es que, en primer lugar, no teníamos sitio, siendo cuatro en el taxi. Eso me tranquilizaba. Era demasiado estrecho.

Y, además, que íbamos bastante deprisa ahora por el adoquinado de los bulevares del Sena y pegábamos unos botes, que no podíamos ni movernos…

«¡Ven, Léon! – le ordenó entonces-. ¡Ven! ¡Te lo pido por última vez! ¿Me oyes? ¡Ven! ¡Mándalos a freír espárragos! ¿Es que no oyes lo que te digo?»

Una comedia de verdad.

«¡Para el taxi, venga, Léon! ¡Páralo tú o lo paro yo misma!»

Pero él, Léon, seguía sin moverse de su asiento. Estaba clavado.

«Entonces, ¿no quieres venir? – volvió a insistir-. ¿No quieres venir?»

Me había avisado que lo mejor que podía hacer yo era quedarme tranquilo. Despachado. «¿No vienes?», le repetía. El taxi seguía a gran velocidad, la carretera estaba despejada ahora y pegábamos botes aún mayores. Como paquetes, para aquí, para allá.

«Bueno -concluyó, en vista de que él no le respondía nada-. ¡Muy bien! ¡De acuerdo! ¡Tú lo habrás querido! ¡Mañana! ¿Me oyes? Mañana, a más tardar, iré a ver al comisario y le explicaré, yo, al comisario, ¡cómo cayó en su escalera la tía Henrouille! ¿Me oyes, ahora? ¿Di, Léon?… ¿Estás contento?… ¿Ya no te haces el sordo? ¡O te vienes conmigo ahora mismo o voy a verlo mañana por la mañana!… A ver, ¿quieres venir o no? ¡Explícate!…» Era categórica, la amenaza.

En aquel momento, él se decidió a responderle un poco.

«Pero, bueno, ¡si tú estás pringada también! – le dijo-. ¡Qué vas a decir tú…!»

Al oírle responder aquello, ella no se calmó lo más mínimo: al contrario. «¡Me importa un comino! – le respondió-. ¡Estar pringada! ¿Quieres decir que iremos a la cárcel los dos?… ¿Que fui tu cómplice?… ¿Es eso lo que quieres decir?… Pero, ¡si no deseo otra cosa!…»

Y de pronto se echó a reír burlona, como una histérica, como si en su vida hubiera conocido cosa más graciosa…

«Pero, ¡si no deseo otra cosa, ya te digo! Pero, ¡si a mí me gusta la cárcel! ¡Te lo digo yo!… ¡No te vayas a creer que me voy a rajar por miedo a la cárcel!… ¡Iré cuantas veces quieran, a la cárcel! Pero tú también irás entonces, ¿eh, cabrón?… ¡Al menos, ya no te burlarás más de mí!… ¡Soy tuya, de acuerdo! Pero, ¡tú eres mío! ¡Haberte quedado conmigo allí! Yo sólo conozco un amor, ¿sabe, usted? ¡Yo no soy una puta!»

Y nos desafiaba, a mí y a Sophie, al mismo tiempo, al decir eso. De fidelidad hablaba, de consideración.

Pese a todo, seguíamos en marcha y Robinson seguía sin decidirse a detener al taxista.

«Entonces, ¿no vienes? ¿Prefieres ir a presidio? ¡Muy bien!… ¿Te la trae floja que te denuncie?… ¿Que te quiera?… ¿Te la trae floja también? ¿Eh?… ¿Y mi porvenir te la trae floja?… Todo te la trae floja, en realidad, ¿no es así? ¡Dilo!»

«Sí, en cierto sentido… -respondió él-. Tienes razón… Pero no más tú que otra, me la traes floja… ¡Sobre todo no te lo tomes como un insulto!… Tú eres simpática, en el fondo… Pero ya no deseo que me amen… ¡Me da asco!…»

No se esperaba que le dijeran una cosa así, ahí, en sus narices, y tanto la sorprendió, que ya no sabía cómo reanudar la bronca que había iniciado. Estaba bastante desconcertada, pero volvió a empezar, de todos modos. «¡Ah! ¡Conque te da asco!… ¿Cómo que te da asco? ¿Qué quieres decir?… Explícate, ingrato asqueroso…»

«¡No! No eres tú, ¡es que todo me da asco! – le respondió él-. No tengo ganas… No hay que tomármelo en cuenta…»

«¿Cómo dices? ¡Repítelo!… ¿Yo y todo? – Intentaba comprender-. ¿Yo y todo? Pero, ¡explícate! ¿Qué quiere decir eso?… ¿Yo y todo?… ¡No hables en chino!… Dímelo en cristiano, delante de ellos, por qué te doy asco ahora. ¿Es que no te empalmas como los demás, eh, cacho cabrón? ¿Cuando haces el amor? A ver, ¿no te empalmas? ¿Eh?… Atrévete a decirlo aquí… delante de todo el mundo… ¡que no te empalmas!…»

Pese a su furia, daba un poco de risa su manera de defenderse con esas observaciones. Pero no tuve mucho tiempo para divertirme, porque volvió a la carga. «Y ése, ¿qué? – dijo-. ¿Es que no se pone las botas, siempre que puede atraparme en un rincón? ¡Ese asqueroso! ¡Ese sobón! ¡A ver si se atreve a decirme lo contrario!… Pero decidlo todos, ¡que lo que queréis es variar!… ¡Re-conocedlo!… ¡Que lo que necesitáis es la novedad!… ¡Orgías!… ¿Por qué no jovencitas vírgenes? ¡Hatajo de depravados! ¡Hatajo de cerdos! ¿Por qué buscáis pretextos?… Lo que os pasa es que estáis hastiados de todo, ¡y se acabó! Sólo, ¡que ya no tenéis valor para vuestros vicios! ¡Os dan miedo vuestros vicios!»

Y entonces fue Robinson quien se encargó de responder. Se había irritado también, al final, y ahora berreaba tan fuerte como ella.

«Pero, ¡claro que sí! – le respondió-. ¡Claro que tengo valor! ¡Y seguro que tanto o más que tú!… Sólo, que yo, si quieres que te diga la verdad… toda absolutamente… pues, ¡es que todo me repugna y me asquea ahora! ¡No sólo tú!… ¡Todo!… ¡Sobre todo el amor!… El tuyo como el de los demás… Ese rollo de sentimientos que andas tirándote, ¿quieres que te diga a qué se parece? ¡Se parece a hacer el amor en un retrete! ¿Me comprendes ahora?… Y los sentimientos que andas sacando para que me quede pegado a ti, me sientan como insultos, por si te interesa saberlo… Y ni siquiera lo sospechas, además, porque la asquerosa eres tú, que no te das cuenta… ¡Y ni siquiera te imaginas que eres una asquerosa!… Te basta con repetir los rollos que anda soltando la gente… Te parece normal… Te basta porque te han contado que no había nada mejor que el amor y que le da a todo el mundo *y* siempre… Bueno, pues, ¡yo me cago en ese amor de todo el mundo!… ¿Me oyes? Yo ya no pico, chica… ¡en su asqueroso amor!… ¡Vas lista!… ¡Llegas demasiado tarde! Yo ya no pico, ¡y se acabó!… ¡Y por eso te enfureces!… ¿Sigue interesándote hacer el amor en medio de todo lo que ocurre?… ¿De todo lo que vemos?… ¿O es que no ves nada?… ¡Más bien creo que te importa un pepino!… Te haces la sentimental, pero eres una bestia como no hay dos… ¿Quieres jalar carne podrida? ¿Con tu salsa a base de ternura?… ¿Te pasa así?… ¡A mí, no!… Si no hueles nada, ¡mejor para ti! ¡Es que tienes la nariz tapada! Hay que estar embrutecido como estáis todos para que no os dé asco… ¿Quieres saber lo que se interpone entre tú *y* yo?… Bueno, pues, entre tú y yo se interpone la vida entera… ¿No te basta acaso?»

«Pero mi casa está limpia… -se rebeló ella-. Se puede ser pobre y, aun así, limpio, ¡qué caramba! ¿Cuándo

has visto tú que no estuviera limpia mi casa? ¿Eso es lo que quieres decir al insultarme?… Yo tengo el culo limpio, ¡para que se entere usted!… ¡Quizá tú no puedas decir lo mismo!… ¡ni los pies tampoco!»

«Pero, ¡si yo no he dicho nunca eso, Madelon! ¡Yo no he dicho nada así!… ¡Que tu casa no esté limpia!… ¿Ves como no comprendes nada?» Eso era lo único que se le había ocurrido para calmarla.

«¿Que no has dicho nada? ¿Nada? Mirad cómo me insulta y me deja por los suelos, ¡y encima, se pone que no ha dicho nada! Pero, ¡si es que habría que matarlo para que no pudiera mentir más! ¡El trullo no es bastante para un mierda como éste! ¡Un chulo asqueroso y degenerado!… ¡No basta!… ¡Lo que le haría falta es el patíbulo!»

Ya no quería calmarse de ningún modo. Ya no se entendía nada de su disputa en el taxi. Sólo se oían palabrotas con el estruendo del auto, el golpeteo de las ruedas con la lluvia y el viento que se lanzaba contra nuestra portezuela a ráfagas. íbamos atestados de amenazas. «Es innoble… -repitió varias veces. Ya no podía hablar de otra cosa-. ¡Es innoble! – Y después probó el juego fuerte-: ¿Vienes? – le dijo-. ¿Vienes, Léon? ¿A la una?… ¿Vienes? ¿A las dos?… -Esperó-. ¿A las tres?… ¿No vienes, entonces?» «¡No! – le respondió él, sin hacer el menor movimiento-. ¡Haz lo que quieras!», añadió incluso. Respuesta clara.

Ella debió de echarse hacia atrás un poco en el asiento, al fondo. Debía de sujetar el revólver con las dos manos, porque, cuando le salió el disparo, parecía proceder derecho de su vientre y después, casi juntos, dos tiros más, dos veces seguidas… Lleno de humo picante quedó el taxi entonces.

Seguimos en marcha, de todos modos. Cayó sobre mí, Robinson, de lado, a sacudidas, farfullando. «¡Hop!» y «¡Hop!» No cesaba de gemir. «¡Hop!» y «¡Hop!» El conductor tenía que haber oído.

Aminoró un poco sólo al principio, para cerciorarse. Por fin, se detuvo del todo delante de un farol de gas.

En cuanto hubo abierto la portezuela, Madelon le dio un violento empujón y se lanzó afuera. Cayó rodando por el terraplén. Se largó corriendo entre la obscuridad del campo y por el barro. De nada sirvió que yo la llamara, ya estaba lejos.

Yo no sabía qué hacer con el herido. Llevarlo hasta París habría sido lo más práctico en cierto sentido… Pero ya no estábamos lejos de nuestra casa… La gente del pueblo no habría comprendido la maniobra… Conque Sophie y yo lo tapamos con los abrigos y lo colocamos en el propio rincón donde Madelon se había situado para disparar. «¡Despacio!», recomendé al conductor. Pero aún iba demasiado rápido, tenía prisa. Los tumbas hacían gemir aún más a Robinson.

Una vez que llegamos ante la casa, ni siquiera quería darnos su nombre, el conductor; estaba preocupado por los líos que eso le iba a traer, con la policía, los testimonios…

Decía también que seguramente habría manchas de sangre en los asientos. Quería marcharse al instante. Pero yo había tomado su número.

En el vientre había recibido Robinson las dos balas, tal vez tres, no sabía yo aún cuántas exactamente.

Había disparado justo delante de ella, eso lo había visto yo. No sangraban, las heridas. Entre Sophie y yo, pese a que lo sujetábamos, daba muchos tumbos, de todos modos, la cabeza se le bamboleaba. Hablaba, pero era difícil comprenderlo. Era ya delirio. «¡Hop!» y «¡Hop!», seguía canturreando. Iba a tener tiempo de morirse antes de que llegáramos.

La calle estaba recién adoquinada. En cuanto llegamos ante la verja, envié a la portera a buscar a Parapine en su habitación, a toda prisa. Bajó al instante y con él y un enfermero pudimos subir a Léon hasta su cama. Una vez desvestido, pudimos examinarlo y palparle la pared abdominal. Estaba ya muy tensa, la pared, bajo los dedos, a la palpación, e incluso producía un sonido sordo en algunos puntos. Dos agujeros, uno encima del otro, encontré, una de las balas debía de haberse perdido.

Si yo hubiera estado en su lugar, habría preferido una hemorragia interna, eso te inunda el vientre, y tarda poco. Se te llena el peritoneo y se acabó. Mientras que una peritonitis es infección en perspectiva, larga.

Podíamos preguntarnos cómo iría a hacer, para acabar. El vientre se le hinchaba, nos miraba, Léon, ya muy fijo, gemía, pero no demasiado. Era como una calma. Yo ya lo había visto muy enfermo, y en muchos lugares diferentes, pero aquello era un asunto en que todo era nuevo, los suspiros y los ojos y todo. Ya no se lo podía retener, podríamos decir, se iba de minuto en minuto. Transpiraba con gotas tan gruesas, que era como si llorase con toda la cara. En esos momentos es un poco violento haberse vuelto tan pobre y tan duro. Careces de casi todo lo que haría falta para ayudar a morir a alguien. Ya sólo te quedan cosas útiles para la vida de todos los días, la vida de la comodidad, la vida propia sólo, la cabronada. Has perdido la confianza por el camino. Has expulsado, ahuyentado, la piedad que te quedaba, con cuidado, hasta el fondo del cuerpo, como una píldora asquerosa. La has empujado hasta el extremo del intestino, la piedad, con la mierda. Ahí está bien, te dices.

Y yo seguía, delante de Léon, para compadecerme, y nunca me había sentido tan violento. No lo conseguía… Él me encontraba… Las pasaba putas… Él debía de buscar a otro Ferdinand, mucho mayor que yo, desde luego, para morir, para ayudarlo a morir más bien, más despacio. Hacía esfuerzos para darse cuenta de si por casualidad no habría hecho progresos el mundo. Hacía el inventario, el pobre desgraciado, en su conciencia… Si no habrían cambiado un poco los hombres, para mejor, mientras él había vivido, si no habría sido alguna vez injusto con ellos sin quererlo… Pero sólo estaba yo, yo y sólo yo, junto a él, un Ferdinand muy real al que faltaba lo que haría a un hombre más grande que su simple vida, el amor por la vida de los demás. De eso no tenía yo, o tan poco, la verdad, que no valía la pena enseñarlo. Yo no era grande como la muerte. Era mucho más pequeño. Carecía de la gran idea humana. Habría sentido incluso, creo, pena con mayor

facilidad de un perro estirando la pata que de él, Robinson, porque un perro no es listillo, mientras que él era un poco listillo, de todos modos, Léon. También yo era un listillo, éramos unos listillos… Todo lo demás había desaparecido por el camino y hasta esas muecas que pueden aún servir junto a los agonizantes las había perdido, había perdido todo, estaba visto, por el camino, no encontraba nada de lo que se necesita para diñarla, sólo malicias. Mi sentimiento era como una casa adonde sólo se va de vacaciones. Es casi inhabitable. Y, además, es que es exigente, un agonizante moribundo. Agonizar no basta. Hay que gozar al tiempo que se casca, con los últimos estertores hay que gozar aún, en el punto más bajo de la vida, con las arterias llenas de urea.

Lloriquean aún, los agonizantes, porque no gozan bastante… Reclaman… Protestan. Es la comedia de la desgracia, que intenta pasar de la vida a la propia muerte.

Recuperó un poco el sentido, cuando Parapine le hubo puesto la inyección de morfina. Nos contó incluso cosas entonces sobre lo que acababa de ocurrir. «Es mejor que esto acabe así… -dijo y añadió-: No duele tanto como yo hubiera creído…» Cuando Parapine le preguntó en qué punto le dolía exactamente, se veía ya bien que estaba un poco ido, pero también que aún quería, pese a todo, decirnos cosas… Le faltaba la fuerza y también los medios. Lloraba, se asfixiaba y se reía un instante después. No era como un enfermo corriente, no sabíamos qué actitud adoptar ante él.

Era como si intentara ayudarnos a vivir ahora a nosotros. Como si nos buscase, a nosotros, placeres para permanecer. Nos tenía cogidos de la mano. Una a cada uno. Lo besé. Eso es ya lo único que se puede hacer sin equivocarse en esos casos. Esperamos. Ya no dijo nada más. Un poco después, una hora tal vez, no más, se decidió la hemorragia, pero entonces abundante, interna, masiva. Se lo llevó.

Su corazón se puso a latir cada vez más deprisa y después como un loco. Corría, su corazón, tras su sangre, agotado, ahí, minúsculo ya, al final de las arterias, temblando en la punta de los dedos. La palidez le subió desde el cuello y le inundó toda la cara. Acabó asfixiándose. Se marchó de golpe, como si hubiera tomado carrerilla, apretándose contra nosotros dos, con los dos brazos.

Y después volvió, ante nosotros, casi al instante, crispado, adquiriendo ya todo su peso de muerto.

Nos levantamos, nosotros, nos desprendimos de sus manos. Se le quedaron en el aire, las manos, muy rígidas, alzadas, bien amarillas y azules bajo la lámpara.

En la habitación parecía un extranjero ahora, Robinson, que viniera de un país atroz y al que no nos atreviésemos ya a hablar.

Parapine conservaba la presencia de ánimo. Encontró el medio de enviar a un hombre a la comisaría. Precisamente era Gustave, nuestro Gustave, quien estaba de plantón, después de volver de su trabajo con el tráfico.

«¡Vaya, otra desgracia!», dijo Gustave, en cuanto entró en la habitación y vio.

Y después se sentó al lado para cobrar aliento y echar un trago también en la mesa de los enfermeros, que aún no habían recogido. «Como es un crimen, lo mejor sería llevarlo a la comisaría -propuso y después comentó también-: Era un buen chico, Robinson, incapaz de hacer daño a una mosca. Me pregunto por qué lo habrá matado…» Y volvió a echar un trago. No debería haberlo hecho. Toleraba mal la bebida. Pero le gustaba la botella. Era su debilidad.

Fuimos a buscar una camilla arriba, con él, en el almacén. Era ya muy tarde para molestar al personal, decidimos transportar el cuerpo hasta la comisaría nosotros mismos. La comisaría quedaba lejos, en el otro extremo del pueblo, después del paso a nivel, la última casa.

Conque nos pusimos en marcha. Parapine sujetaba la camilla por delante. Gustave Mandamour por el otro extremo. Sólo, que no iban demasiado derechos ni uno ni otro. Sophie tuvo incluso que guiarlos un poco para bajar la escalerita. En aquel momento observé que no parecía demasiado emocionada, Sophie. Y, sin embargo, había sucedido a su lado y tan cerca incluso, que habría podido muy bien recibir una de las balas, mientras la otra loca disparaba. Pero Sophie, ya lo había yo notado en otras circunstancias, necesitaba tiempo para ponerse a tono con las emociones. No es que fuera fría, ya que le venía más bien como una tormenta, pero necesitaba tiempo.

Yo quería seguirlos aún un poco con el cuerpo para asegurarme de que todo había acabado. Pero, en lugar de seguirlos con su camilla, como debería haber hecho, deambulé más bien de derecha a izquierda a lo largo de la carretera y después, al final, una vez pasada la gran escuela que está junto al paso a nivel, me metí por un caminito que baja entre los setos primero y después a pique hacia el Sena.

Por encima de las verjas los vi alejarse con su camilla, iban como a asfixiarse entre las fajas de niebla, que se rehacían despacio detrás de ellos. A orillas del río el agua chocaba con fuerza contra las gabarras, bien apretadas contra la crecida. De la llanura de Gennevilliers llegaba aún un frío que pelaba a bocanadas sobre los remolinos del río y lo hacía relucir entre los arcos del puente.

Allí, muy a lo lejos, estaba el mar. Pero yo ya no podía imaginar nada sobre el mar. Tenía otras cosas que hacer. De nada me servía intentar perderme para no volver a encontrarme ante mi vida, por todos lados me la encontraba, sencillamente. Volví sobre mí mismo. Mi trajinar estaba acabado y bien acabado. ¡Que otros siguieran!… ¡El mundo se había vuelto a cerrar! ¡Al final habíamos llegado, nosotros!… ¡Como en la verbena!… Sentir pena no basta, habría que poder reanudar la música, ir a buscar más pena… Pero, ¡que otros lo hiciesen!… Es juventud lo que pedimos de nuevo, así, como quien no quiere la cosa… ¡Y desenvueltos!… Para empezar, ¡ya no estaba dispuesto a soportar más tampoco!… Y, sin embargo, ¡ni siquiera había llegado

tan lejos como Robinson, yo, en la vida!… No había triunfado, en definitiva. No había logrado hacerme una sola idea de ella bien sólida, como la que se le había ocurrido a él para que le dieran para el pelo. Una idea más grande aún que mi gruesa cabeza, más grande que todo el miedo que llevaba dentro, una idea hermosa, magnífica y muy cómoda para morir… ¿Cuántas vidas me harían falta a mí para hacerme una idea así más fuerte que todo en el mundo? ¡Imposible decirlo! ¡Era un fracaso! Mis ideas vagabundeaban más bien en mi cabeza con mucho espacio entre medias, eran como humildes velitas trémulas que se pasaban la vida encendiéndose y apagándose en medio de un invierno abominable y muy horrible…

Las cosas iban tal vez un poco mejor que veinte años antes, no se podía decir que no hubiese empezado a hacer progresos, pero, en fin, no era de prever que llegara nunca yo, como Robinson, a llenarme la cabeza con una sola idea, pero es que una idea soberbia, claramente más poderosa que la muerte, y que consiguiera, con mi simple idea, soltar por todos lados placer, despreocupación y valor. Un héroe fardón.

La tira de valor tendría yo entonces. Chorrearía incluso por todos lados valor y vida y la propia vida ya no sería sino una completa idea de valor, que lo movería todo, a los hombres y las cosas desde la Tierra hasta el Cielo. Amor habría tanto, al mismo tiempo, que la Muerte quedaría encerrada dentro con la ternura y tan a gusto en su interior, tan caliente, que gozaría al fin, la muy puta, que acabaría divirtiéndose con amor también ella, con todo el mundo. ¡Eso sí que sería hermoso! ¡Sería un éxito! Me reía solo a la orilla del río pensando en todos los trucos que debería hacer para llegar a hincharme así con resoluciones infinitas… ¡Un auténtico sapo de ideal! La fiebre, al fin y al cabo.

¡Hacía una hora por lo menos que los compañeros me buscaban! Sobre todo porque habían advertido sin duda alguna que, al separarme de ellos, no estaba animado precisamente… Fue Gustave Mandamour quien me divisó el primero bajo el farol de gas. «¡Eh, doctor! – me llamó. Tenía, la verdad, una voz de la hostia, Mandamour-. ¡Por aquí! ¡Lo llaman en la comisaría! ¡Para la declaración!…» «Oiga, doctor… -añadió, pero entonces al oído-, ¡tiene usted muy mal aspecto!» Me acompañó. Me sostuvo incluso para andar. Me quería mucho, Gustave. Yo no le hacía nunca reproches sobre la bebida. Comprendía todo, yo. Mientras que Parapine, ése era un poco severo. Le avergonzaba de vez en cuando por lo de la bebida. Habría hecho muchas cosas por mí, Gustave. Me admiraba incluso. Me lo dijo. No sabía por qué. Yo tampoco. Pero me admiraba. Era el único.

Recorrimos dos o tres calles juntos hasta divisar el farol de la comisaría. Ya no podíamos perdernos. El informe que debía hacer era lo que le preocupaba, a Gustave. No se atrevía a decírmelo. Ya había hecho firmar a todo el mundo, al pie del informe, pero, aun así, le faltaban todavía muchas cosas a su informe.

Tenía una cabeza enorme, Gustave, por el estilo de la mía, y hasta podía yo ponerme su quepis, con eso está dicho todo, pero olvidaba con facilidad los detalles. Las ideas no acudían solícitas, hacía esfuerzos para expresarse y muchos más aún para escribir. Parapine lo habría ayudado con gusto a redactar, pero no sabía nada de las circunstancias del drama, Parapine. Habría tenido que inventar y el comisario no quería que se inventaran los informes, quería la verdad y nada más que la verdad, como él decía.

Al subir por la escalerita de la comisaría, iba yo tiritando. Tampoco yo podía contarle gran cosa al comisario, no me encontraba bien, la verdad.

Habían colocado el cuerpo de Robinson ahí, delante de las filas de enormes archivadores de la comisaría.

Impresos por todos lados en torno a los bancos y a las colillas viejas. Inscripciones de «Muerte a la bofia» no del todo borradas.

«¿Se ha perdido usted, doctor?», me preguntó el secretario, muy cordial, por cierto, cuando por fin llegué. Estábamos todos tan cansados, que farfullamos todos, unos tras otros, un poco.

Por fin, llegamos a un acuerdo sobre los términos y las trayectorias de las balas, una incluso que estaba aún alojada en la columna vertebral. No la encontrábamos. Lo enterrarían con ella. Buscaban las otras. Clavadas en el taxi estaban, las otras. Era un revólver potente.

Sophie vino a reunirse con nosotros, había ido a buscar mi abrigo. Me besaba y me apretaba contra sí, como si yo fuera a morir, a mi vez, o a salir volando. «Pero, ¡si no me voy! – no me cansaba de repetirle-. Pero, bueno, Sophie, ¡que no me voy!» Pero no era posible tranquilizarla.

Nos pusimos a hablar en torno a la camilla con el secretario de la comisaría, que estaba curado de espanto, como él decía, en cuanto a crímenes y no crímenes y catástrofes también e incluso quería contarnos todas sus experiencias a la vez. Ya no nos atrevíamos a irnos para no ofenderlo. Era demasiado amable. Le daba gusto hablar por una vez con gente instruida, no con golfos. Conque, para no desairarlo, nos entretuvimos mucho en la comisaría.

Parapine no llevaba impermeable. Gustave, de oírnos, sentía acunada su inteligencia. Se quedaba con la boca abierta y su gruesa nuca tensa, como si tirara de un carro. Yo no había oído a Parapine pronunciar tantas palabras desde hacía muchos años, desde mi época de estudiante, a decir verdad. Todo lo que acababa de ocurrir aquel día lo embriagaba. Nos decidimos, de todos modos, a regresar a casa.

Nos llevamos con nosotros a Mandamour y también a Sophie, que todavía me daba apretones de vez en cuando, con el cuerpo lleno de las fuerzas de inquietud y de ternura, hermosa, y el corazón también. Yo estaba henchido de su fuerza. Eso me molestaba, no era la mía y la mía era la que yo necesitaba para ir a diñarla magníficamente un día, como Léon. No tenía tiempo que perder en muecas. ¡Manos a la obra!, me decía yo. Pero no me venía.

Ni siquiera quiso Sophie que me volviera a mirarlo por última vez, el cadáver. Conque me fui sin

volverme. «Cierren la puerta», decía un cartel. Parapine tenía sed aún. De hablar, seguramente. Demasiado hablar, para él. Al pasar por delante del quiosco de bebidas del canal, llamamos en el cierre un buen rato. Eso me recordaba la carretera de Noirceur durante la guerra. La misma línea de luz encima de la puerta y dispuesta a apagarse. Por fin, llegó el patrón, en persona, para abrirnos. No estaba enterado. Se lo contamos todo nosotros y la noticia del drama también. «Un drama pasional», como lo llamaba Gustave.

La tasca del canal abría justo antes del amanecer para los barqueros. La esclusa empieza a girar sobre su eje despacio hacia el final de la noche. Y después todo el paisaje se reanima y se pone a trabajar. Las planchas se separan del río muy despacio, se alzan, se elevan a ambos lados del agua. El currelo emerge de la sombra. Se empieza a ver todo de nuevo, sencillo, duro. Los tornos aquí, las empalizadas de las obras allá y lejos, por encima de la carretera, ahí vuelven de más lejos los hombres. Se infiltran en el sucio día en grupitos transidos. El día les inunda la cara para empezar, al pasar delante de la aurora. Van más lejos. Sólo se les ve bien la cara pálida y sencilla; el resto está aún en la noche. También ellos tendrán que diñarla un día. ¿Cómo harán?

Suben hacia el puente. Después desaparecen poco a poco en la llanura y llegan otros hombres más, más pálidos aún, a medida que el día se alza por todas partes. ¿En qué piensan?

El patrón de la tasca quería enterarse de todo lo relativo al drama, las circunstancias, que le contáramos todo.

Vaudescal se llamaba, el patrón, un muchacho del norte muy limpio.

Gustave le contó entonces todo y más.

Nos repetía, machacón, las circunstancias, Gustave, y, sin embargo, no era eso lo importante; nos perdíamos ya en las palabras. Y, además, como estaba borracho, volvía a empezar. Sólo, que entonces ya no tenía nada más que decir, la verdad, nada. Yo lo habría escuchado con gusto un poco más, bajito, como un sueño, pero entonces los otros se pusieron a protestar y eso le irritó.

De rabia, fue a dar un patadón a la estufita. Todo se derrumbó, se volcó: el tubo, la rejilla y los carbones en llamas. Era un cachas, Mandamour, como cuatro.

Además, ¡quiso enseñarnos la auténtica Danza del Fuego! Quitarse los zapatos y saltar de lleno en los tizones.

El patrón y él habían hecho un negocio con una «máquina tragaperras» no registrada… Era muy falso, Vaudescal; no había que fiarse de él, con sus camisas siempre demasiado limpias como para ser del todo honrado. Un rencoroso y un chivato. Hay la tira de ésos por los muelles.

Parapine sospechó que iba por Mandamour, para que lo expulsaran del cuerpo, aprovechando que había bebido demasiado.

Le impidió hacerla, su Danza del Fuego, y le avergonzó. Empujamos a Mandamour hasta el extremo de la mesa. Se desplomó ahí, por fin, muy modosito, entre suspiros tremendos y olores. Se quedó dormido.

A lo lejos, pitó el remolcador; su llamada pasó el puente, un arco, otro, la esclusa, otro puente, lejos, más lejos… Llamaba hacia sí a todas las gabarras del río, todas, y la ciudad entera y el cielo y el campo y a nosotros, todo se llevaba, el Sena también, todo, y que no se hablara más de nada.

* Elisabeth Craig era la bailarina americana, nacida en 1902, que Céline había conocido en Ginebra, a finales de 1926 o comienzos de 1927, y con la que vivió en París de 1927 a 1933, en una relación muy libre, interrumpida por las estancias de Elisabeth en los Estados Unidos. Henri Mahé la describe así: «Grandes ojos verde cobalto […]. Naricilla fina… Una boca rectangular y sensual […]. Largos cabellos dorados tirando a rojizos en bucles hasta los hombros» (La Brinquebale avec Céline.)

En una de las primeras entrevistas después de la publicación de Viaje al fin de la noche, Céline la cita como uno de sus tres maestros: «[…] una bailarina americana que me ha enseñado todo lo relativo al ritmo, la música y el movimiento» (entrevista con M. Bromberger, Cahiers Céline, I, págs. 31-32).

En junio de 1933, Elisabeth se marchó a los Estados Unidos, temporalmente, pensaba Céline, pero aquella vez no regresó y él aprovechó su viaje a los Estados Unidos en el verano de 1934 para ir a Los Ángeles a intentar convencerla de que volviera a Francia. Pero Elisabeth había decidido romper. Céline siempre recordó aquel último encuentro, sobre el que carecemos de información segura, como una pesadilla. No cabe duda de que Elisabeth fue la mujer a la que se sintió más unido y que desempeñó, más que ninguna otra, un papel en su vida.

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